National Digital Navigator Corps Program Evaluation Report

May 2026

NDIA
NATIONAL DIGITAL INCLUSION ALLIANCE

NATIONAL Digital Navigator CORPS

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Introduction

In February 2022, the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) received a grant from Google.org to create the National Digital Navigator Corps (NDNC), a pilot program intended to build and advance local digital inclusion work in rural and Indigenous communities and strengthen the digital navigator (DN) model in those contexts. To do this, NDIA supported DN programs in 18 community-based organizations serving rural and Tribal communities across the United States while gathering lessons learned, identifying best practices, and developing replicable resources to share with others.

NDIA partnered with AMERIND Critical Infrastructure (AMERIND), a Tribally-owned and operated risk management company, to support the seven sites in Indigenous communities and the additional three serving Tribal communities. Subgrants were made to support each of the 18 DN programs over the course of the 36-month grant period. The subgrants funded one full-time equivalent (FTE) digital navigator position, partial salaries for a program manager and data manager to support the DN program, devices to be distributed to community members, and travel to NDIA's annual conference with dedicated pre-conference training for the subgrantee DNs. Along with direct funding support, NDIA and AMERIND directly provided initial training, ongoing professional development, and technical assistance for digital navigators, program managers, and data managers. All organizational program staff participated in role-specific cohorts led by NDIA and AMERIND's Digital Inclusion Manager throughout the grant period. Mentors and advisors provided additional training and technical assistance to the subgrantees.

In the grant proposal to Google.org, NDIA described nine distinct outcomes that it intended to achieve through the NDNC program:

Outcome 1. Establish a national corps of 18 digital navigators assigned in rural and Tribal communities for 31 month terms to lead the acquisition of and procurement of access to the internet, digital inclusion devices, services and digital skills training to those in need.

Outcome 2. Provide an opportunity for local people to serve their community as digital navigators, thereby creating a leadership pipeline in rural and Tribal communities.

Outcome 3. Increase the capacity of 11 local rural organizations and 7 local Tribal communities to connect community members with affordable broadband access, personal devices that meet the needs of the user and access to basic and advanced digital literacy training.

Outcome 4. Increase digital equity expertise at AMERIND and within the 18 host organizations.

Outcome 5. Build the digital equity data collection and analysis expertise of 18 host organizations.

Outcome 6. 13,000 community members in high-impact communities reached over two-and-a-half years of direct service while also measuring digital skills growth, learner confidence, and overall program efficacy.

Outcome 7. Strengthen the Digital Navigator Model, documenting and disseminating lessons learned, particularly as pertains to use of the model in rural and Tribal areas.

Outcome 8. Share analysis, findings, and recommendations of the National Digital Navigator Corps through NDIA network of partners and affiliates.

Outcome 9. NDIA will be a more effective partner with rural and Tribal organizations advocating for digital inclusion resources and policy changes.

This evaluation summarizes key findings from the NDNC program, including the status of these proposed outcomes. It also describes the impacts of the NDNC program on the subgrantee organizations, the individuals and communities they served, NDIA, AMERIND, and the broader digital inclusion field; and provides a set of recommendations intended for funders and organizations interested in growing and sustaining the digital navigator model and digital inclusion work in Tribal and rural communities. Where findings address one of the nine program outcomes, the relevant outcome is highlighted in a pop-out box set in a lilac background.

Example Outcome: You'll find the outcomes with relevant findings in pop-out boxes with purple backgrounds like this.

Evaluation Methodology

This program evaluation utilizes a mixed-methods approach, incorporating a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods and sources. As described below, some information was gathered and reported by the 18 individual subgrantee sites for the purposes of administering and evaluating their individual digital navigator programs. These resources were compiled and analyzed to create an overall picture of the NDNC program and to identify the differences between the subgrantees' programs. Other information, gathered expressly for this program evaluation, was intended to create a deeper understanding of the experiences of staff and program participants that may not be apparent or fully explained in the data collected by the sites.

Subgrantee program data

Throughout the NDNC program, the 18 subgrantee sites collected data about the participants served and the services delivered through their digital navigator programs. The data sites collected included participant needs, goals, and demographics at intake; details about client interactions including session details, skills assessments, and progress toward goal achievement; devices distributed through the program; and information about client outcomes from follow-up surveys and impact stories. These data were collected continually by each site and were integral to successfully managing their digital navigator services throughout the grant period. Because they reflect near-real-time participant interactions (most data was recorded during or soon after sessions with participants), they provide a detailed and robust dataset to support evaluation of the NDNC program across all 18 sites. Data from the subgrantee sites were aggregated and summarized to characterize the NDNC program holistically.

Subgrantee evaluation reports

In the fall of 2025, after completion of the NDNC grant period, each subgrantee completed an individual program evaluation for their digital navigator program, except for Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) which withdrew from the NDNC grant early. These program evaluations followed a consistent template that was provided to each of the subgrantees (see Appendix for the Digital Navigator Program Evaluation Template). In these evaluations, subgrantees combined program participant data,

impact stories, and staff reflections to measure success at achieving program goals; document impacts of the digital navigator program on community members, partners, and their own organization; and identify lessons learned and next steps for providing digital navigator services.

Along with their value to the individual subgrantee organizations, the 17 program evaluation reports provided data analyses and lessons learned in a standardized format that allowed for a compilation of findings and comparison between subgrantees for this evaluation. In particular, high-level data on participant demographics and program measures (e.g., participant, session, and device counts) were informed, in-part, by the evaluation reports. The summaries of program impacts, lessons learned, and future plans for digital navigator services were analyzed to identify common themes about the digital navigator services and the NDNC program as a whole across subgrantees.

Subgrantee, AMERIND, and NDIA staff self-assessments

Understanding the experiences and perceptions of the people responsible for establishing and delivering digital navigator services, and of those who provided training and support to the subgrantees is key to evaluating the success of the program outcomes and the NDNC program overall. Following the completion of NDNC program activities, staff from the subgrantee organizations, AMERIND, and NDIA were asked to reflect on their experiences over the course of the program in a self-assessment survey. The subgrantee staff survey was distributed to all program managers, data managers, and digital navigators at each site, with some questions asked to all respondents and some role-specific questions. The survey generally asked staff to discuss the benefits, challenges, and impacts of the NDNC program for their organization and for themselves individually. The self-assessment also sought input about NDIA's partnership with their organization and how similar programs could be improved in the future. A total of 45 subgrantee self-assessments were collected, and at least one staff person from all subgrantees, except AFN, completed a self-assessment.

The AMERIND and NDIA staff surveys focused on the partnership between those two organizations, successes and challenges with administering the NDNC program, and experiences and knowledge gained throughout the process. A total of three

self-assessments were completed by AMERIND staff and four by NDIA staff. All three self-assessment survey protocols can be found in the Appendix.

Subgrantee subset study

To gain a more nuanced understanding of how the NDNC program and the digital navigator model worked within subgrantee organizations, and to learn more about sources of variation in service performance, compliance with data procedures, and data quality across sites, NDIA undertook a focused study of a subset of four subgrantees following the completion of NDNC program activities. The participants in the subset study were:

- Cherokee Nation
- Community Service Programs of West Alabama (CSPWAL)
- Hoopa Valley Public Utilities District (HVPUD)
- Shaping our Appalachian Region (SOAR)

The subset study consisted of more detailed analyses of the program data from these subgrantees, particularly data related to participant goals and skill gains, along with staff interviews and participant focus groups.

Subset staff interviews

Staff from the subset sites participated in 1-on-1 interviews during which they shared insights about the successes and challenges of implementing their digital navigator services, the training and support provided by NDIA and AMERIND, and the ways that the digital navigator services were integrated into their organizations and adapted to meet community needs. These interviews allowed for more in-depth exploration of themes that emerged from the broader subgrantee self-assessments. Nine interviews were conducted across the four subset study sites; they included a combination of program managers, data managers, digital navigators, and staff who filled multiple of these roles. The interview protocol can be found in the Appendix.

Participant focus groups

NDIA conducted focus groups with program participants from three of the four subset study sites (CSPWAL, HVPUD, and SOAR). Digital navigators from the three sites helped recruit participants and a total of 10 community members who had previously received digital navigator services from the sites joined the focus groups, with each session having three or four participants. The focus groups were site-specific;

participants were grouped with others who worked with the same digital navigator program (and in all cases the same individual digital navigator) to allow for discussion of their experiences with comparable service offerings and delivery methods. During the focus groups, participants discussed how they learned about the digital navigator program, their initial motivations for seeking support, their experiences interacting with the digital navigator, and how their uses of technology changed after working with the programs. The focus group protocol can be found in the Appendix.

Establishing the National Digital Navigator Corps

Outcome 1: Establish a national corps of 18 digital navigators assigned in rural and Tribal communities for 31 month terms to lead the acquisition of and procurement of access to the internet, digital inclusion devices, services and digital skills training to those in need.

The digital navigator model prior to NDNC

The digital navigator model was initially developed and piloted in 2020 by NDIA and members of NDIA's Digital Navigator Working Group. While many organizations and practitioners had been providing holistic, one-on-one digital inclusion support service for years, 2020 pilot programs by organizations like Salt Lake City Public Library and others formalized the model (including data collection methods and forms) and expanded the term digital navigator. Over the past several years, the digital navigator model has expanded and evolved, enabling community-based organizations to serve more community members in need of digital inclusion services. There are now hundreds of digital navigator programs across the country as evidenced by the growth of NDIA's Digital Navigator Working Group, which now has a membership of greater than 400.

Despite the proliferation and success of digital navigator programs, they have not expanded equally to all areas. Digital navigator programs tend to be heavily concentrated in urban and suburban communities where there are more community anchor institutions and where population densities are high. However, the need for personalized and comprehensive technology support is particularly acute for economically vulnerable residents in rural and Tribal communities. In addition to the significant broadband availability barriers they encounter, they also often lack the resources and capacity to address the need for personal devices and digital skills training. These communities need local community members who understand the availability and use gaps of broadband, along with potential solutions to increase access and usage. As a result of this need, the NDNC was established as a multi-year pilot aimed at launching and expanding digital navigator services in rural and Tribal communities.

Selecting subgrantees and launching the program

Organizations interested in becoming a National Digital Navigator Corps site were required to submit a Letter of Intent (LOI) to demonstrate the need for the project in the proposed community and the capacity of the organization to serve a rural or Tribal community for the duration of the project. Organizations were notified of the status of their LOI in May 2022 and successful organizations were invited to submit a full application in June 2022. NDIA worked with a program advisory panel of 9 reviewers representing state governments, libraries, and community-based organizations serving rural and Tribal communities to review all submitted applications and work in collaboration with NDIA and AMERIND to select the 18 NDNC sites.

Proposals were evaluated against a scoring rubric. Strong applications demonstrated community need, defined a target audience, and complemented existing digital inclusion efforts. Applicants serving rural or Tribal communities, particularly those with deep community trust and local engagement, were prioritized. Reviewers assessed the applicant's management capacity, including staffing, recruitment, and sustainability planning, as well as the strength of partnerships and community collaboration. Proposals included a clear evaluation plan with measurable outcomes and a realistic, well-researched budget within the established funding range (grant awards ranged between $300,000 and $389,000).

Applicants were notified of the status of their proposal in July 2022 and the formal kick off of NDNC with the 18 selected subgrantee sites (Table 1) was held in August 2022.

Staffing for NDNC subgrantees

Over the course of the project, 32 digital navigators formed the NDNC digital navigator cohort across the 18 subgrantee organizations. Many of the digital navigators were young professionals with backgrounds in social work or education. A few digital navigators had a background in retail technology support. Four digital navigators had retired from their primary career before joining this project and at least two had prior military service. Six organizations had multiple simultaneous digital navigators at some point in the project. Five of those had a primary digital navigator that fully participated in NDIA-led cohort activities with additional staff providing digital navigator support part-time. One organization began the project with two half-time digital navigators

who shared responsibilities and cohort participation equally, with the goal of having individuals based in two distinct communities in their service area. They determined that a single digital navigator was better able to take ownership of the project, which was needed to give the project a strong start. JNet, serving Jemez Pueblo, approaches all their work as a team, with cross-training and rotating responsibilities, so they also applied the team approach to digital navigator support. Digital navigators served between 2-33 months, with an average of 19 months.

Figure 1: Total Active Digital Navigators by Month

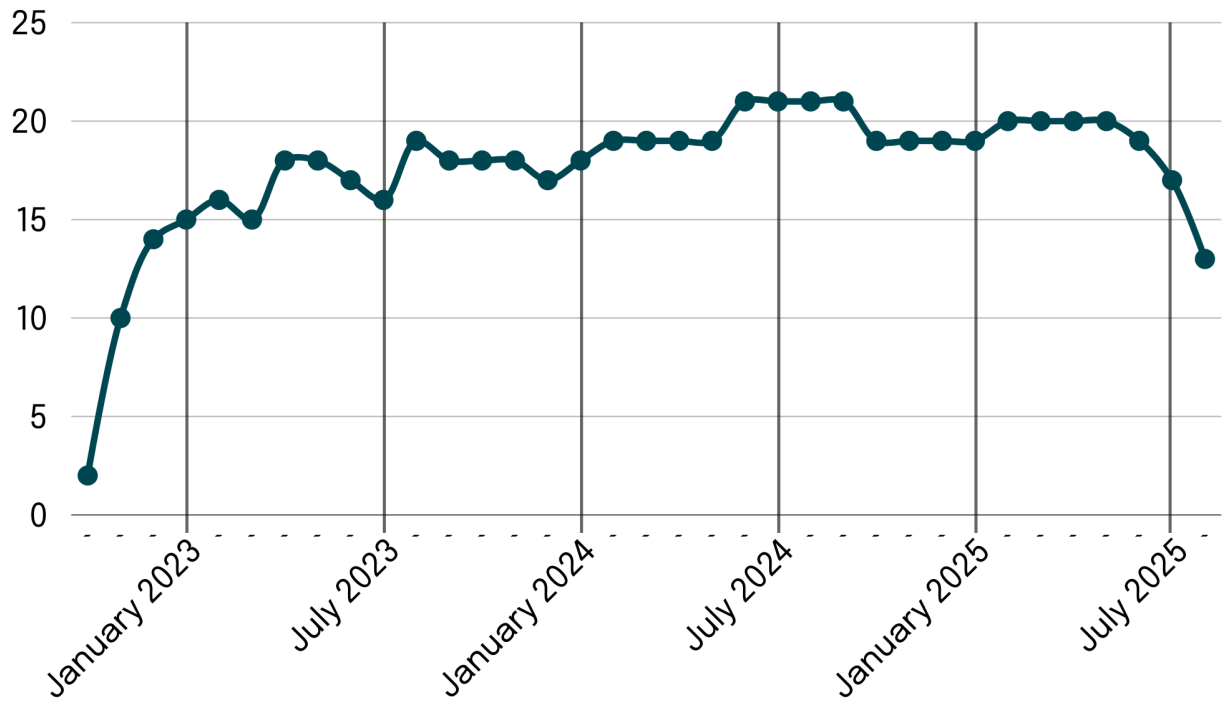


Table 1: List of NDNC Subgrantee Organizations

Subgrantee Name	Target Service Area (encompassing states)
Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN)	Alaska Native Villages (throughout AK)
Cayuse Native Solutions (CNS)	Umatilla Reservation and Off-Reservation Trust Land (OR & WA)
Community Broadband Action Network (CBAN)	Decatur, Montgomery, Ringgold, & Taylor Counties (IA)
Cherokee Nation	Adair, Cherokee, Craig, Delaware, Mayes, McIntosh, Muskogee, Nowata, Ottawa, Rogers, Sequoyah, Tulsa, Wagoner, & Washington Counties (OK)
Computer Reach	Washington County (PA)
Community Service Programs of West Alabama (CSPWAL)	Bibb, Choctaw, Dallas, Fayette, Greene, Hale, Lamar, Perry, Pickens, Sumter, & Tuscaloosa Counties (AL)
Digital Connect Initiative, Gila River (DCI)	Gila River Indian Reservation (AZ)
Easter Seals of Greater Houston (ESGH)	Brazos, Burleson, Fort Bend, Grimes, Leon, Liberty, Madison, Montgomery, Robertson, & Washington Counties (TX)
Forest County Broadband Committee	Forest County, Forest County Potawatomi Community, & Sokaogon Chippewa Community (WI)
Hocking Athens Perry Community Action (HAPCAP)	Athens, Hocking, & Perry Counties (OH)
Hoopa Valley Public Utilities District (HVPUD)	Hoopa & Willow Creek (CA)
Jemez Pueblo (JNet)	Jemez Pueblo (NM)
Lummi Indian Business Council	Lummi Reservation (WA)
National Digital Equity Center (NDEC)	Washington County (ME)
Northwestern Ohio Community Action Commission (NOCAC)	Defiance, Fulton, Henry, Paulding, Van Wert, & Williams Counties (OH)
Pottsboro Area Public Library	Denison, Pottsboro, & Sherman Counties (TX)
Shaping Our Appalachian Region (SOAR)	Elliott, Floyd, Johnson, Morgan, Pike, & Wolfe Counties (KY)
Washington State University Extension - Grays Harbor County (WSU - Grays Harbor)	Grays Harbor County, Chehalis Reservation, & Quinault Reservation (WA)

Each organization dedicated existing staff to support the project, and grant funds were used to offset their salary costs. A program manager was identified to supervise the digital navigator and provide leadership for the project. A data manager was identified to ensure consistent and reliable data collection and to assist with reporting. Both roles were given dedicated professional development and project-specific training. Approximately 50 people filled these project support roles by the end of the grant term.

Context about communities served

One of the stated goals for the NDNC program was to implement digital navigator programs in rural and Tribal communities, both to bring technology resources and services to underserved areas and to better understand how to deliver digital navigator services in low-density areas. As Table 2 shows, the subgrantee organizations overwhelmingly serve low-density, rural communities. The median population density for the areas served by NDNC subgrantees is about 63 people and 25 households per square mile. For comparison, the United States as a whole has 96.3 people and 37.6 households per square mile. Those subgrantees with higher overall population densities tended to have a small number of urban clusters within a much larger rural service area. Jemez Pueblo is a significant outlier in the group, as it is a relatively dense community covering an area of just two square miles.

The communities served by the subgrantee digital navigator programs are not only sparsely populated, but they are also under-resourced with regards to technology access. Nearly all have lower levels of home broadband service and home computer access, and greater reliance on smartphones and cellular data plans as a sole means of internet access, than the nation as a whole. The data presented in Table 2 is aggregate data for the entire service area of each subgrantee. It is important to note that significant variations in internet and computer access exist across the communities and counties that constitute an individual subgrantee's service area. Greater details about the characteristics of the specific communities served by the subgrantees are included in each subgrantee's program evaluation report.

Table 2: Populations and Digital Equity Characteristics of Subgrantee Service Areas

Organization	Total Population	Total Households	Population Density	Household Density	% HH with One or More Types of Computing Devices	% HH with Desktop or Laptop	% HH with Smartphone with No Other Computing Devices	% HH with Broadband	% HH with Cellular Data Plan with No Other Type of Internet Subscription
CNS	2,921	1,010	10.7	3.7	94.6%	78.3%	9.5%	58.5%	9.5%
CBAN	28,588	11,998	14.1	5.9	88.7%	69.1%	13.5%	59.8%	15.8%
Cherokee Nation	1,235,167	536,469	139.7	60.7	93.9%	73.2%	13.9%	86.3%	14.4%
Computer Reach	210,232	89,091	245.3	104.0	94.7%	77.1%	10.3%	76.4%	13.4%
CSPWAL	397,663	149,972	44.9	16.9	90.2%	65.7%	17.4%	58.7%	22.9%
DCI	26,766	6,720	45.8	11.5	78.5%	54.7%	15.0%	53.3%	9.9%
ESGH	1,981,898	685,638	244.9	84.7	97.0%	85.1%	8.1%	77.2%	10.3%
Forest County	10,355	4,293	10.0	4.1	89.1%	70.4%	11.2%	82.9%	13.8%
HAPCAP	124,985	47,636	93.8	35.7	91.7%	72.1%	12.2%	85.1%	16.3%
HVPUD	3,173	1,030	22.4	7.3	88.4%	66.5%	16.3%	20.0%	6.0%
JNet	3,500	625	1,750.0	312.5	82.4%	52.2%	20.8%	54.8%	6.0%
Lummi Indian Business Council	4,917	1,839	235.5	88.1	96.7%	80.3%	10.0%	91.2%	9.5%
NDEC	31,095	13,989	12.1	5.5	90.0%	71.0%	10.7%	83.0%	9.0%
NOCAC	192,787	78,132	77.8	31.5	92.6%	74.1%	11.0%	67.9%	11.3%
Pottsboro	73,007	28,413	928.6	361.4	94.4%	72.9%	7.8%	88.1%	13.8%
SOAR	143,030	57,333	62.8	25.2	88.0%	64.2%	13.1%	69.6%	9.2%
WSU-Grays Harbor	78,108	30,593	35.1	13.8	93.8%	75.2%	10.4%	88.3%	13.1%
United States	340,110,988	132,737,146	96.3	37.6	96.6%	80.5%	9.9%	93.2%	12.6%

Delivering Digital Navigator Services to the Community

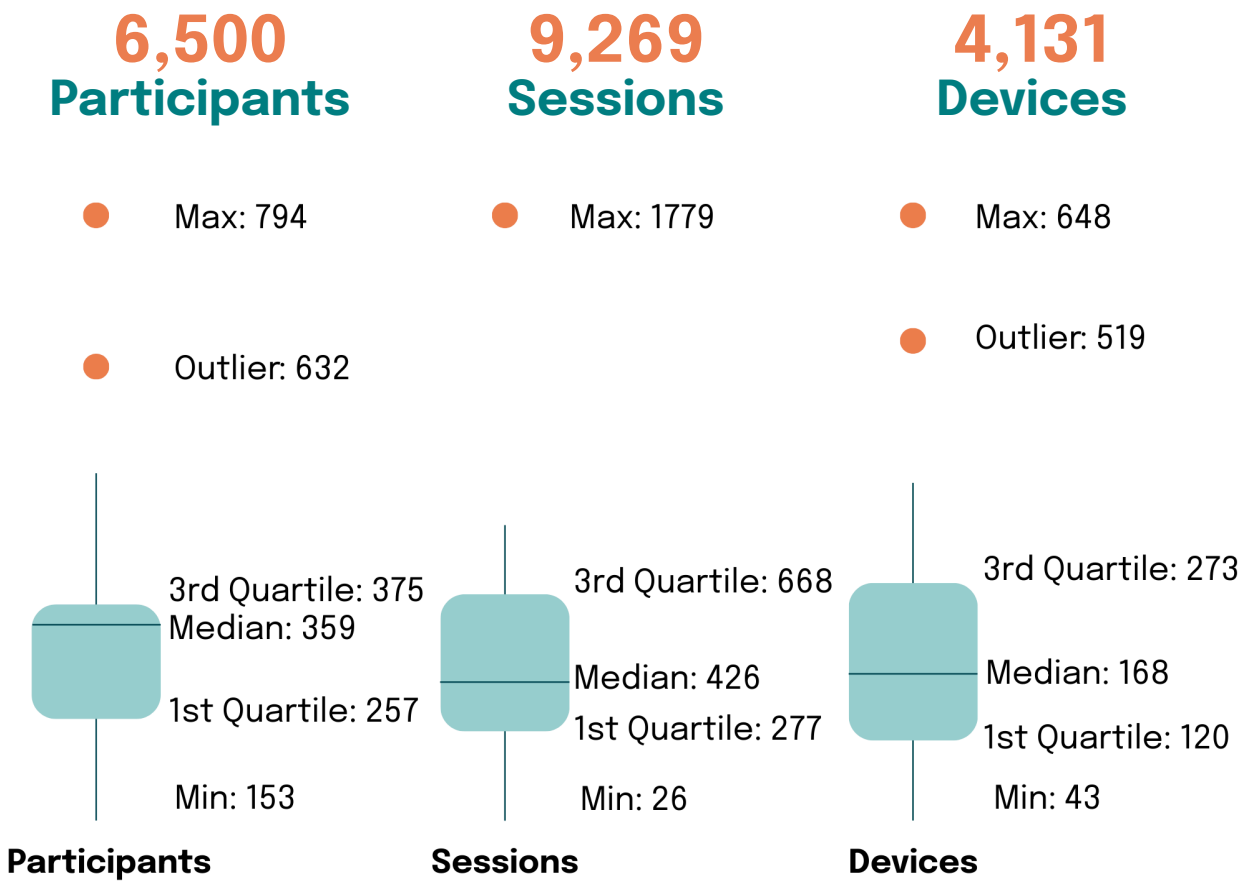
Outcome 6: 13,000 community members in high-impact communities reached over two-and-a-half years of direct service while also measuring digital skills growth, learner confidence, and overall program efficacy.

Findings for all sites

Combined, the 18 NDNC subgrantees delivered digital navigator services to 6,506 community members. The most participants for a single site was 794 and the least was 153, with the majority of sites serving between 250 and 380 participants (Figure 2). Subgrantees reported conducting a total of 9,269 sessions with participants. Although, due to inconsistent collection and documentation of session data by a few subgrantees, the actual number of total sessions is likely much higher, as more than 1,400 participants had no session data recorded. This is clearly visible in the wide variation in number of sessions recorded by different sites–the largest number of sessions recorded was nearly 1,800 while the smallest number was just 26 (Figure 2).

In addition to training and technical support from digital navigators, NDNC provided community members with material technology resources. Each subgrantee was allocated grant funds over the life of the NDNC program to purchase devices for distribution to community members. Sites were given considerable flexibility in how these funds were utilized, including the types of devices that were made available and distribution strategies. A total of 4,131 devices were distributed to participants as part of the digital navigator services provided. Device strategies also varied between subgrantees. Some leveraged partnerships or existing service delivery models (e.g., learn-to-earn) to provide devices to nearly every participant, while others provided them on an as needed or as requested basis. Two sites, Cherokee Nation and Computer Service Programs of West Alabama, distributed more than 500 devices over the course of the grant period, while device distributions ranged between 100-300 for most sites.

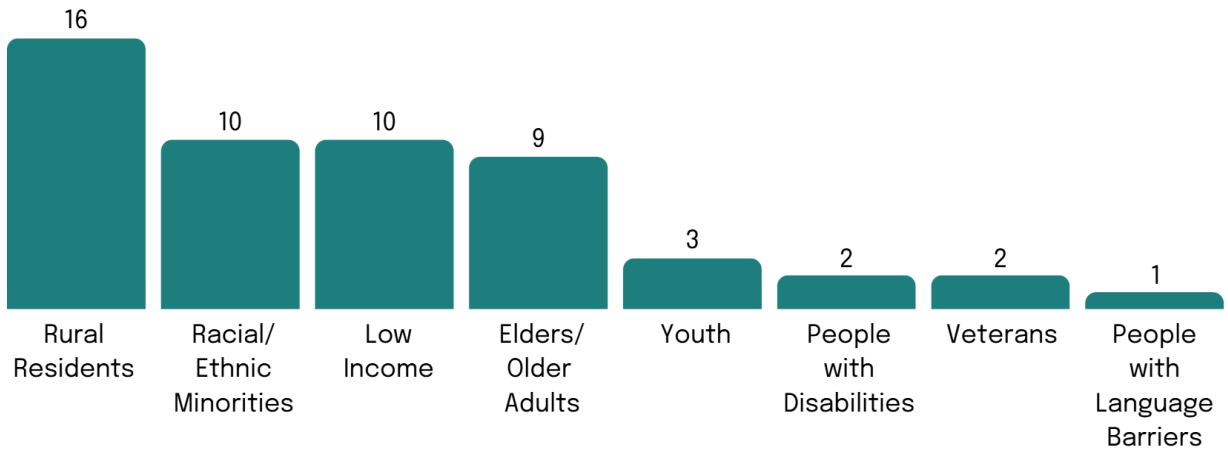
Figure 2: Distribution of Participants, Sessions, and Devices



Participant demographics

Figure 3 shows the number of subgrantees that prioritized serving certain population groups with digital navigator services through the NDNC program. Given the program's emphasis on rural and Indigenous communities, it's unsurprising that nearly all subgrantees prioritized rural residents. The only two that did not specify a focus on rural residents were two Tribal grantees whose communities span a combination of urban and rural areas. NDNC's focus on serving Indigenous communities accounts for the heavy prioritization of racial and ethnic minorities–seven subgrantees were Native-led organizations and another served Indigenous communities within their service areas. Low-income households and elders/older adults were the two other groups that at least half of subgrantees prioritized for service delivery.

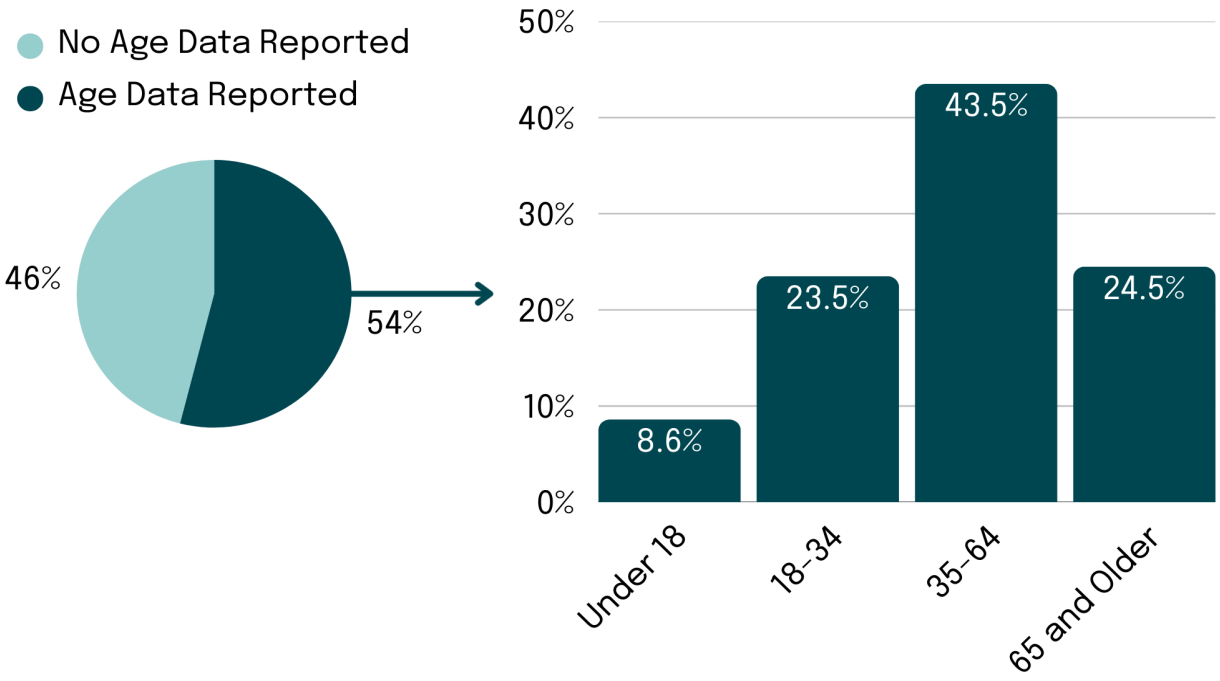
Figure 3: Number of NDNC Subgrantees Prioritizing Certain Populations



Subgrantees were encouraged to collect demographic information about program participants to understand how effectively their digital navigator programs were reaching priority populations. While categories of demographic information were recommended, sites were given flexibility to determine how much data, beyond basic contact information, they would collect about participants. Program participants were also able to opt out of sharing any demographic information. Because of this flexibility, the aggregate demographic data about participants is relatively complete for some categories and is sparse for others.

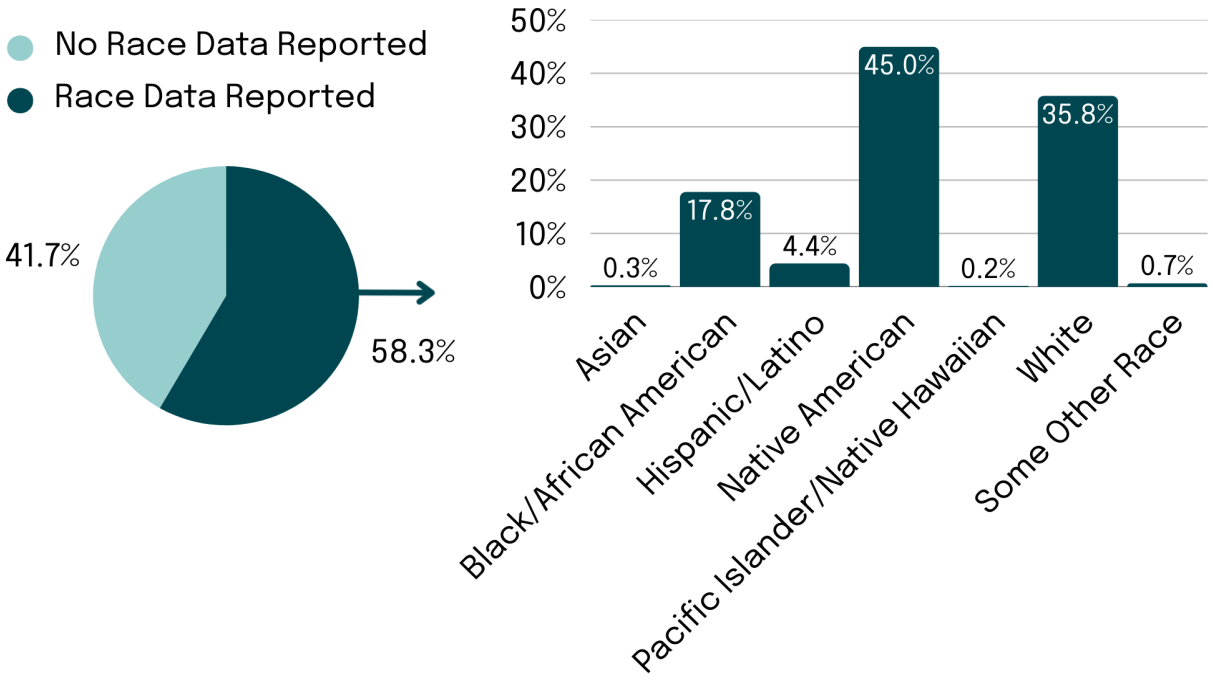
Age data (Figure 4) was recorded for a little less than half of participants (46%). Among participants for whom age data was collected, about two-thirds (67%) were working-aged adults (18-64) while just one-third were youth (under 18) or elders (65+). This is despite the fact that youth and elders were the two age-based groups prioritized by some subgrantees.

Figure 4: NDNC Program Participants by Age Group



Of the participants for whom race/ethnicity data was collected (58.3%), nearly half (45%) were Native American, reflecting the focus of the NDNC program on serving Indigenous communities (Figure 5). The next largest racial/ethnic groups among participants were White (35.8%) and Black/African American (17.8%). It should be noted that, because several subgrantees focused exclusively on serving Native participants and because participants could belong to more than one racial/ethnic group, the data that was collected on race/ethnicity may not be representative of the entire population of NDNC program participants or all subgrantees.

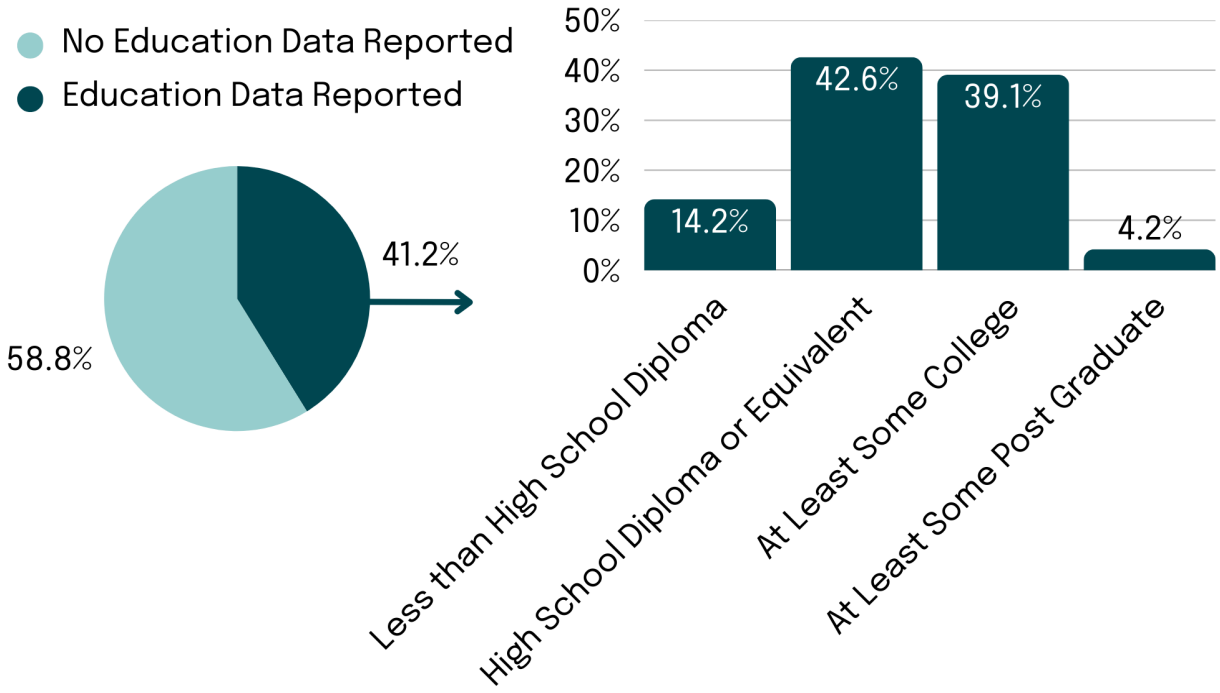
Figure 5: Race/Ethnicity of NDNC Participants



Categories sum to greater than 100% because participants could select more than one response

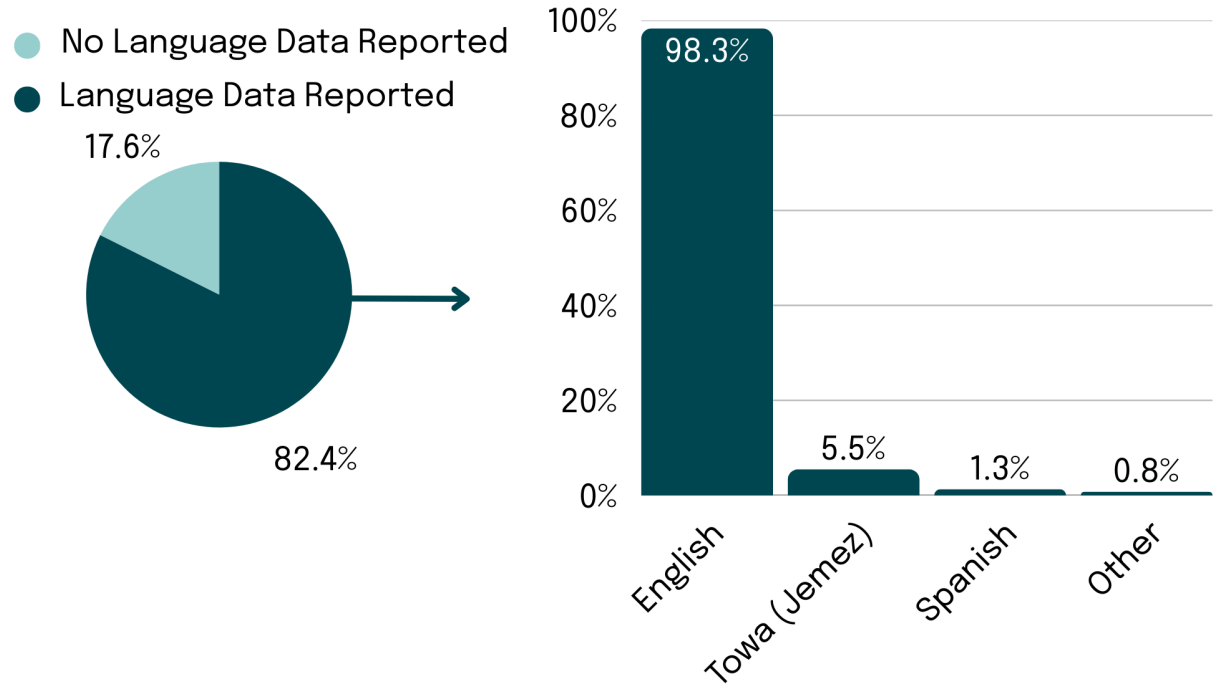
Data on educational attainment was collected for 41.2% of NDNC participants (Figure 6). Of those for whom educational attainment data was reported, more than 85% had completed high school and more than 40% had attended at least some college. Given that approximately 9% of participants were under the age of 18, it is likely that these participants account for the majority of those who have not completed high school.

Figure 6: Educational Attainment of NDNC Participants



Data on languages spoken by program participants (Figure 7) was among the most complete demographic information collected by the subgrantees, with data for more than 80% of participants. English was by far the most common language, spoken by nearly all participants. Notably, Towa, the native language of many residents of the Pueblo of Jemez, was the next most prevalent language. Nearly all participants served by JNET spoke both Towa and English. In their site evaluation and self-assessments staff from JNET emphasized that working with participants on digital skills in their native language was an important component of their digital navigator program.

Figure 7: Languages Spoken by Participants



Categories sum to greater than 100% because participants could select more than one response

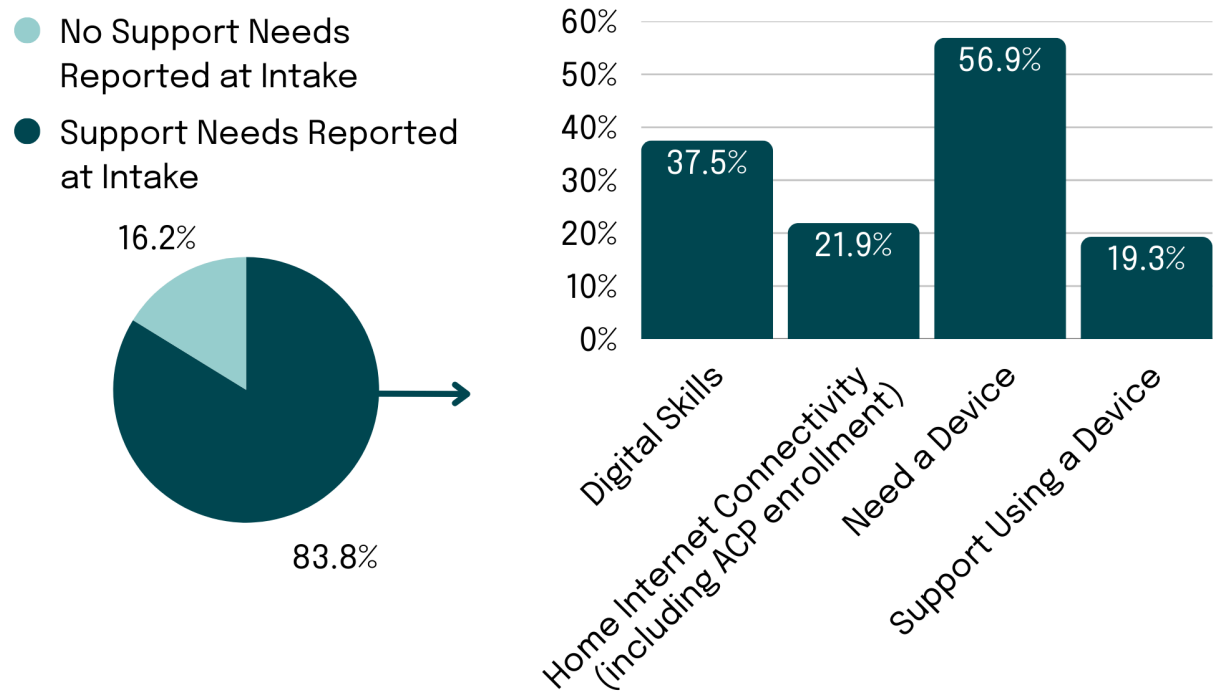
Types of support sought by participants

At intake, digital navigators were instructed to ask participants about the types of technology support they needed along with the goals they hoped to accomplish. Types of support were grouped into four broad categories (participants could identify multiple needs if they wished), whereas goals were captured in participants' own words. Analysis of participant goals is included in the summary of the subset study below). Documenting the types of technology needs that motivated participants to seek support helped subgrantees broadly understand the areas of greatest need in the communities they serve and allowed for comparison across sites. Data on support needs at intake was collected for more than 80% of all participants (Figure 8).

The need for a digital device was the greatest need among participants, with more than half (56.9%) of participants for whom data was recorded requesting a device. The next most common need was help with digital skills at 37.5%, followed by home internet connectivity and support using a device both around 20%. The high percentage of participants expressing the need for a device is influenced by the service delivery strategy employed by some subgrantees. While providing devices was a component of

all subgrantee programs, it was the central feature for a few. Cherokee Nation, CSPWAL, and Computer Reach each provided devices to 100% of participants. CSPWAL and Computer Reach both used the opportunity to receive a free device as an incentive to also complete digital skills training. Cherokee Nation recognized that device access was a priority need among community members and thus focused heavily on distributing devices. As one staff member described, "We began to focus on the main reasons people were coming to us which [were] hotspots/internet access, and needing devices. This allowed us to be more effective in a couple areas rather than mediocre in many."

Figure 8: Participant Technology Support Needs at Intake



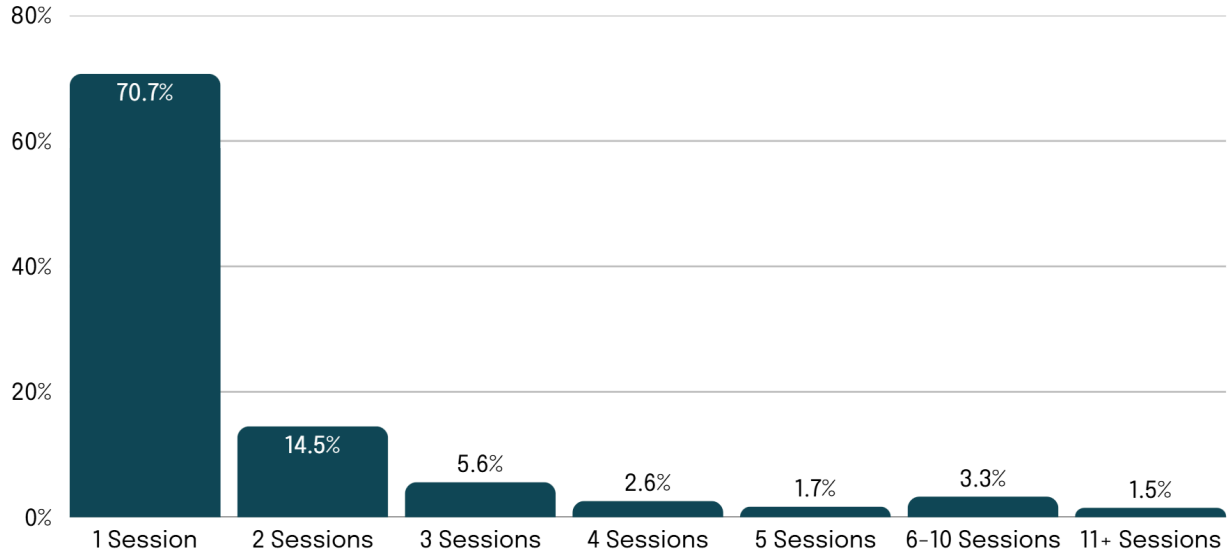
Categories sum to greater than 100% because participants could select more than one response

Digital navigator sessions

Among participants for whom session data was recorded, the average number of sessions per participant was 1.8 while the median was 1. In fact, about 71% of participants had one digital navigator session and 91% had three or fewer (Figure 9). The National Digital Equity Center (NDEC) is an outlier in this regard, averaging 4.7 sessions per participant. Approximately one-third of NDEC's participants had five or more digital navigator sessions, and there were six participants who each had more

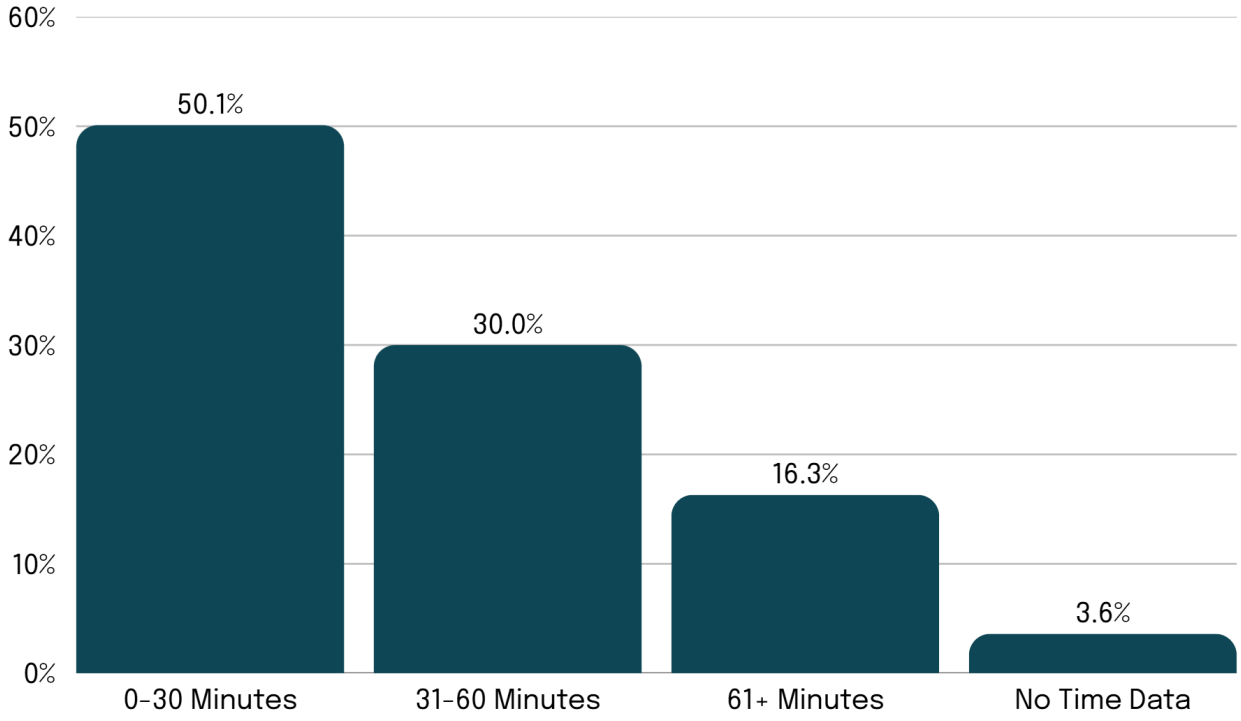
than 25 sessions. In their site evaluation, NDEC did note that they typically require at least two sessions per client. They also noted that many sessions were conducted online or over the phone and that they utilized multiple part-time digital navigators rather than a single full-time one; allowing them to position staff throughout their service area, which reduced travel time and may have enabled more sessions.

Figure 9: Sessions per Participant



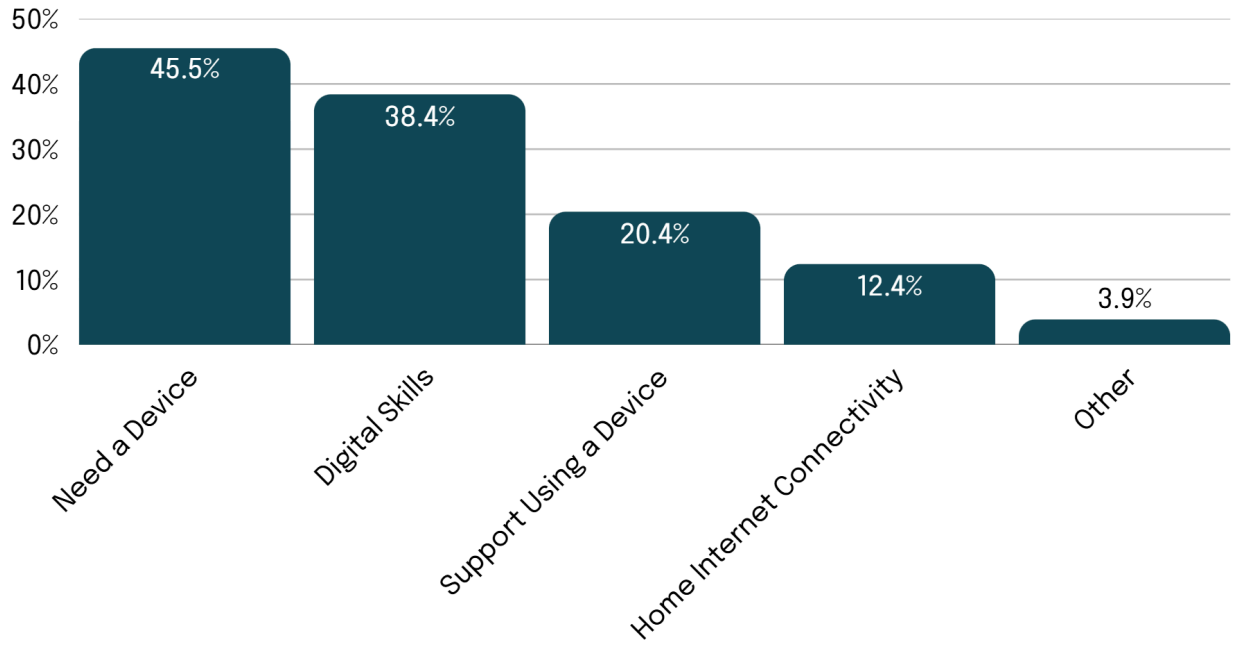
Half of all digital navigator sessions lasted 30 minutes or less and 80% lasted one hour or less (Figure 10). Despite sessions being relatively short, several digital navigators and program managers pointed to travel time to and from locations and time spent doing outreach and building awareness as factors that limited digital navigators' capacity.

Figure 10: Percent of Sessions by Length



Device access was the most common technology need addressed during digital navigator sessions, followed by digital skills, support using a digital device, and home internet connectivity (Figure 11). However, the proportion of sessions addressing device access was lower than the needs participants expressed at intake; while the proportion of sessions addressing digital skills was higher than the needs participants expressed at intake. This is because a large number of participants who needed a device had only one digital navigator session, while participants seeking digital skills support were more likely to have repeat sessions. As one subgrantee observed in their site evaluation report, "We had a larger number of one time clients than repeats, this might be because the majority of the people we served were high school students who really needed the device and the initial introduction, but not much further training or support."

Figure 11: Percent of Sessions by Type



Subset study findings

Through staff interviews, participant focus groups, and in-depth program data analyses with the subgrantees that were part of the subset study, NDIA was able to gain a more nuanced understanding of the impacts of those digital navigator programs for the participants they served.

Participant goals

One of the fundamental features of the digital navigator model is one-on-one technology support that is responsive to the specific needs of program participants. To track success at addressing participants' needs over the course of their interactions with the digital navigator program, digital navigators documented personalized goals for participants in the Digital Navigator Data Platform. Clients could have as many goals as they wanted and progress on each goal was tracked independently throughout their digital navigator sessions.

Of the four subset study participants, only CSPWAL and SOAR documented participant goals consistently enough to allow for analysis. This inconsistency even among the subgrantees in the subset study is indicative of the inconsistencies in recording and tracking participant goals among the full NDNC cohort. Despite these limitations, the data from CSPWAL and SOAR provide useful insights into those programs' effectiveness at addressing participant needs.

Both CSPWAL and SOAR were very successful at tracking participant goal information–every single CSPWAL participant had at least one goal recorded and nearly 80% of SOAR participants did (Table 3). As one staff member described:

"Through NDNC, our organization became much more intentional and effective in how we collected and analyzed client data. By building a consistent intake process, we were able to track trends and needs across the communities we served in a way that directly shaped our outreach and programming."

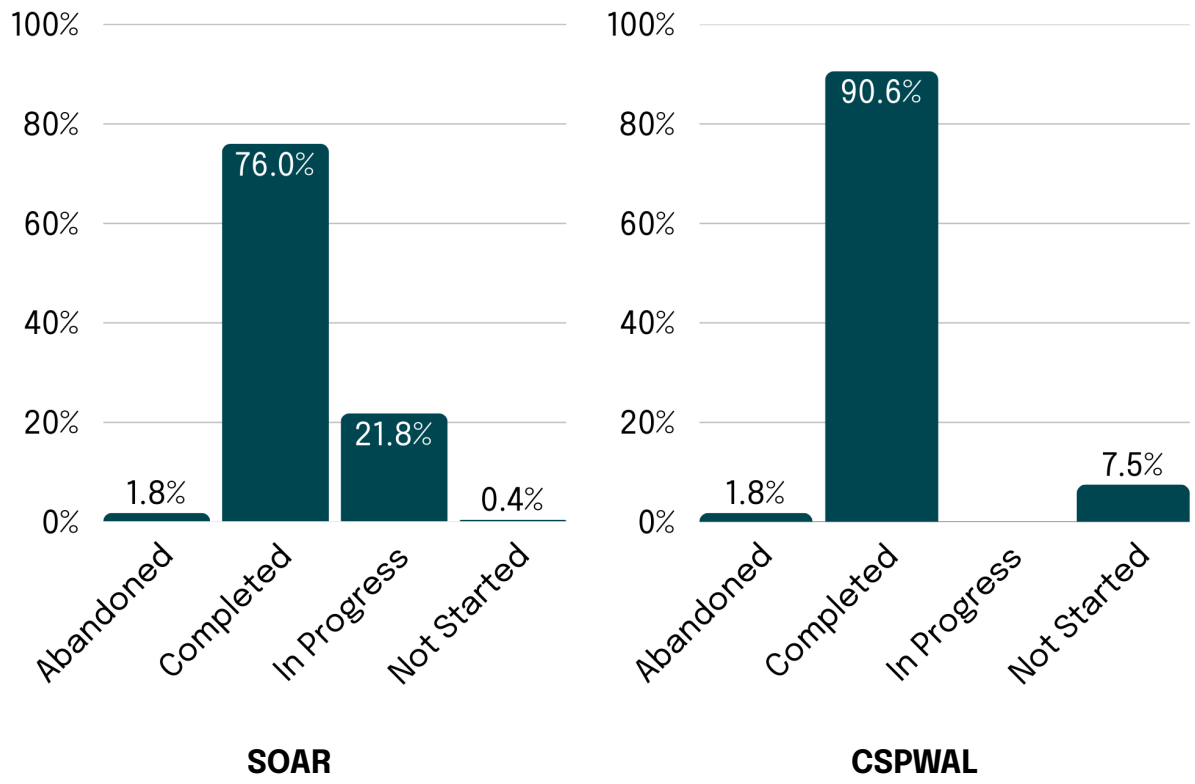
Table 3: Participant Goals for CSPWAL and SOAR

	CSPWAL	SOAR
Total Participants	632	794
Participants with at least 1 goal	632 (100%)	634 (79.8%)
Participants with 2 or more goals	142 (22.5%)	242 (30.5%)
Average goals per participant	1.3	1.7
Average sessions per goal	1.1	1.0

While most participants had a single goal that they hoped to address with the digital navigator, about one-quarter (27%) of participants across these two sites identified two or more goals to work on. SOAR had a slightly higher proportion of participants with two or more goals and a higher average number of goals per participant than CSPWAL, but participants in both programs tended to address their goals in a single session.

Whether participants had one session or multiple interactions, digital navigators were asked to document the status of each goal they worked on with participants during each session. Goals could have a status of "Not Started" (the default when a goal is created), "In Progress," "Completed," or "Abandoned" (Figure 12). **Both CSPWAL and SOAR were highly successful at helping their participants achieve their self-defined goals in seeking digital navigator support, completing 91% and 76% of participant goals respectively.**

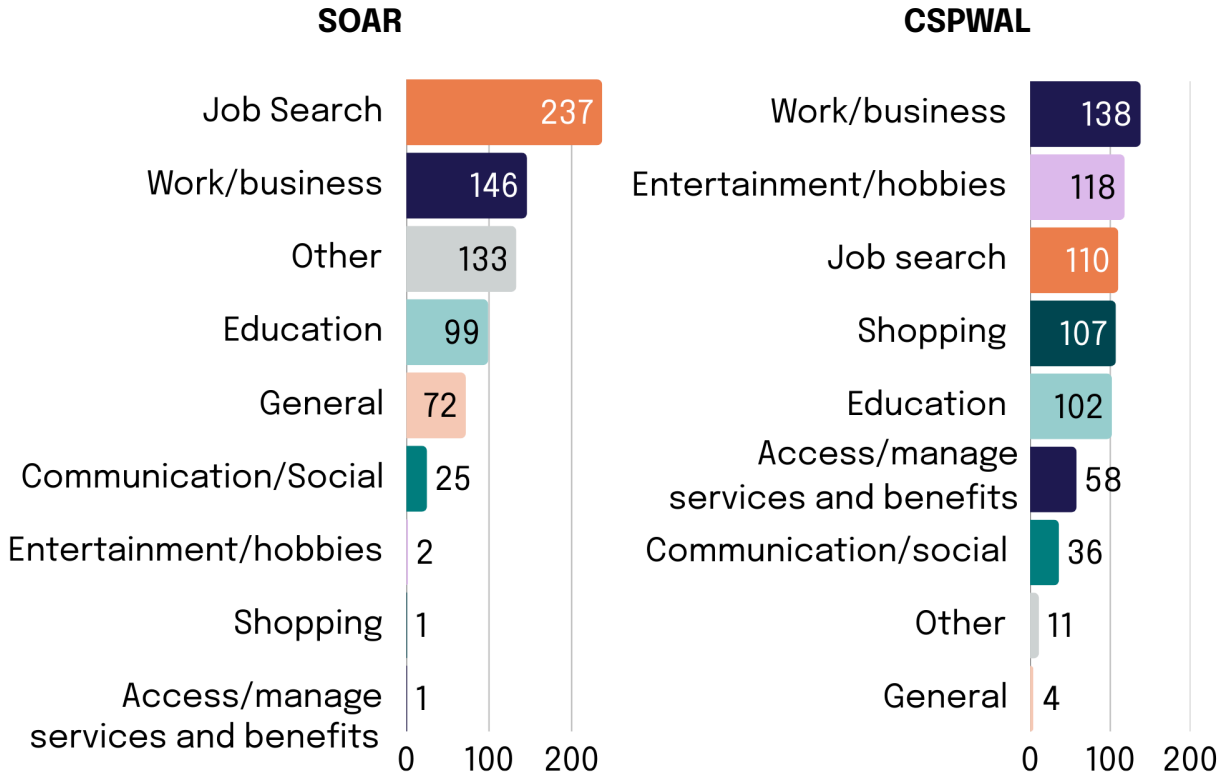
Figure 12: Status of Participant Goals



While each goal was personalized to the participant, the goals were also grouped by specific needs or outcomes that motivated the participant to seek technology support. This categorization allowed for comparison across participants. Job searching and work or business related needs were among the most common for both CSPWAL and SOAR, which directly reflects intentional strategies by both organizations (Figure 13). During interviews and in self-assessments, staff from CSPWAL and SOAR shared that, as the NDNC program progressed, they increasingly targeted job seekers and built partnerships with career centers and other organizations that help people seek new or better employment opportunities. While this was a primary motivation for many participants, goals focused on a range of other desired outcomes as well. Interestingly, entertainment/hobbies and shopping were both near the top of the list for CSPWAL but at the bottom of the list for SOAR. **Regardless of the motivations for any given participant, the spread of goals across a range of need/outcome categories demonstrates the diversity of participants'**

needs and makes a strong case for the generalized type of support that a digital navigator program is designed to offer.

Figure 13: Participant Needs/Desired Outcomes



Skills assessments

Developing digital skills and gaining comfort engaging with technology are key reasons many participants seek support from digital navigators. About 38% of NDNC participants identified digital skills as a need they hoped to address with a digital navigator and about 19% expressed a need for support using a digital device. To measure participants' progress toward building comfort and confidence engaging with technology, key components of skill building, a skills assessment was included in the Digital Navigator Data Platform.

The skills assessment asked participants how frequently they use different types of online technology, including the internet, email, and social media; as well as their confidence with using the internet for various purposes, such as managing finances, applying for a job, or researching health information. Digital navigators were

instructed to conduct a skills assessment with participants at intake if they expressed a need for support with digital skills or with using a device, but were given latitude to determine whether and when to conduct skills assessments based on participant needs and interest. Additionally, for participants who completed an initial skills assessment, digital navigators were encouraged to conduct another assessment at the end of a participant's work with the program. This pre- and post-intervention data would allow subgrantees to measure changes in participants' comfort and confidence with technology over their time working with the digital navigator. Digital navigators were also given the option to conduct intermediate skills assessments as needed.

As discussed previously, administration of skills assessments was sparse across NDNC subgrantees. Among the subset study participants, only CSPWSAL and SOAR collected skills assessment data in any significant numbers, and only CSPWAL conducted enough pre- and post-intervention assessments to allow for analysis (Table 4).

Table 4: Participant Skill Assessments for CSPWAL and SOAR

	CSPWAL	SOAR
Total Participants	632	794
Participants with a pre-/initial skills assessment	632 (100%)	73 (9.2%)
Participants with a pre- and post- skills assessment	105 (16.6%)	2 (0.3%)

The pre- and post-intervention data from CSPWAL shows positive gains in participants' frequency of technology use and confidence with technology from intake to completing their work with the digital navigator program. Almost half of participants said that they use technology more frequently and two-thirds reported increased confidence using technology (Table 5).

Table 5: Change in Skill Assessment Scores for CSPWAL participants

	% of Participants with Increased Score	% Change in Mean Score
Frequency of Technology Use	44.8%	14.9%
Confidence with Technology Use	67.6%	18.4%

A total of 81 participants in CSPWAL's digital navigator program showed an increase in frequency of use, confidence with technology use, or both, compared to just 24 who showed no increase (Table 6). Thirty-seven participants increased both their frequency of technology use and their confidence engaging with technology. Thirty-four participants showed an increase in confidence but not in their frequency of technology use, while just ten increased their frequency of technology use without a gain in confidence. By providing participants opportunities to use technology with personalized support, CSPWAL's digital navigator program creates a setting where technology use and confidence-building are mutually reinforcing.

Table 6: Matrix of CSPWAL participants with increases in frequency and confidence with technology use

	Increased Confidence Score? **No**	Increased Confidence Score? **Yes**
Increased Frequency Score? **No**	24	34
Increased Frequency Score? **Yes**	10	37

A more detailed look at participants' pre- and post-intervention responses to specific questions on the skills assessment offers additional insights into the progress they made working with the digital navigator. Participants were asked about the frequency with which they use the internet in general, email, and social media. They were given five response options: "1- I don't use this," "2 - Once a week or less," "3 - A couple times a week," "4 - Once a day," and "5 - Several times per day"; along with an "I don't know" option. As shown in Table 7, respondents on average reported using the internet, email, and social media between a couple times per week and once per day prior to seeking digital navigator support. Usage of all three increased slightly, with

participants reporting at least daily usage of the internet on average and close to daily usage of email and social media. General internet usage saw the smallest increase while social media usage saw the largest, but this may be because these two uses had the highest and lowest average reported usage, respectively, in the pre-intervention assessments; meaning that social media usage had the most room for increase while general internet usage had the least.

Table 7: Mean Pre & Post Skill Assessment Scores for Frequency of Technology Use Questions for CSPWAL participants

On average, how often do you . . .	Mean Pre-Intervention Score	Mean Post-Intervention Score	Mean Change in Score	Mean % Change in Score
. . . use the internet (for any purpose)?	3.87	4.15	+0.27	7%
. . . check your email?	3.50	3.87	+0.32	10.5%
. . . use social media such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram?	3.33	3.99	+0.54	20%

Along with frequency of technology use, participants were also asked about their confidence using technology for a range of different purposes (Table 8). For each of the confidence questions, respondents were given four response options: "1 - Not at all confident," "2 - Not too confident," "3 - Somewhat confident," and "4 - Very confident." In the pre-intervention responses, respondents fell between "not too confident" and "somewhat confident" for all but one category. Confidence scores increased for all categories, with increases ranging from 10% to 28%. With the exception of the two tasks related to employment (searching for and applying for jobs and training to improve job skills), respondents reported that they felt, on average, somewhat or very confident using the internet for all other purposes during the post-intervention assessments. Additional inquiry may be worthwhile into why participants gained less confidence performing the two employment related tasks. Searching for information saw the smallest increase of all; however, respondents were generally the most confident in that skill coming into the program so may have felt less need for improvement.

Table 8: Mean Pre & Post Skill Assessment Scores for Confidence with Technology Use Questions for CSPWAL participants

Please indicate your level of confidence using the internet to perform the following tasks . . .	Mean Pre-Intervention Score	Mean Post-Intervention Score	Mean Change in Score	Mean % Change in Score
Searching for information	3.10	3.42	+0.32	10%
Searching for and applying for jobs, including creating and submitting a resume	2.55	2.86	+0.31	12%
Finding reliable information about a health or medical condition	2.88	3.29	+0.44	15%
Taking a course or training materials to improve your job skills	2.61	2.96	+0.35	13%
Accessing online banking or financial services	2.53	3.21	+0.67	27%
Accessing or applying for government services	2.51	3.08	+0.56	22%
Finding educational content and information	2.69	3.14	+0.45	17%
Finding tools to keep my information safe and secure online	2.44	3.03	+0.59	24%
Using a video application, such as Zoom	2.47	3.15	+0.68	28%
using a word processing application, such as Google Docs or Microsoft Word, to create a document	2.56	3.06	+0.50	19%
Shopping online	2.87	3.32	+0.45	16%

Participant Impact Stories

The true value and impact of 18 digital navigator programs supported by the NDNC program can only partially be expressed by counting the devices distributed, households who were connected to affordable internet service, skills training sessions delivered, or even by measuring the skills gained by participants. Through more than 100 participant impact stories gathered by the subgrantees and the focus groups conducted with participants from the subset study sites, some of the less tangible but equally important impacts of these programs on the communities they were embedded in and the individuals they served become evident.

Program participants felt improvements in multiple areas of their lives

Most participants who shared impact stories mentioned furthering their education or improving employment opportunities as motivations for seeking digital navigator support. Although these are important outcomes on their own, many participants went on to describe additional ways in which a new device, new skills, or affordable internet access improved their quality of life, including reduced isolation by connecting with family members and friends and accessing entertainment such as streaming media and online applications.

One participant, who is a disabled veteran, described the impacts of digital navigator support on their life. “Thanks to [the digital navigator program] and my new laptop, I have the ability to go back to school and have the means to work on digital art which is a positive way I manage my PTSD."

Another participant, who had recently been incarcerated and was in recovery, was referred to the digital navigator program needing a laptop to use for college classes. "Coming home and entering recovery, I enrolled in community college. A laptop for studies, homework, and research was something I greatly could benefit from. As well as giving me a place for freelance writing."

A referral partner with SOAR also shared, “Our customers come to us with a lot of needs. Most are recently laid off and are devastated about losing their jobs. Others come to us seeking better lives. The devices you are able to give to the customers who complete the assignments make such differences in their lives. They are able to seek work, go back to school and get more training. They are able to better themselves and, in turn, that betters their quality of lives for their families.”

Digital navigator services provide value to people with a range of technology skills and confidence

Participants in the subset study focus groups were asked about the types of support they received from the digital navigators they worked with, as well as about their levels of experience and comfort using the internet for various purposes. All three focus groups included heterogeneous levels of technology confidence and skills, which were reflected in the types of tasks participants worked on with digital navigators. From those requiring help with foundational technology skills to those who self-identified as savvy technology users, all participants felt that they gained new skills and knowledge.

One participant reflected on the skills training she received, "I thought I knew it all until I started going through everything, and I was like, oh, well, I didn't know that. Or, oh, well, that's a lot easier than what I've been doing." Another participant described being hesitant initially, but gaining confidence. "Well, I was real nervous about it, because it had been a long time since I had even touched a computer, but [the digital navigator] made me feel easier about it . . . because I was the oldest person there and I felt like, well, maybe I shouldn't even be here, but I did enjoy it, and I did learn a lot, and it refreshed what I used to know about."

The flexibility of the digital navigators to work with a range of technology needs became apparent through the experiences shared by focus group participants. As one individual said, "He'll let you tell him what you're trying to do and where you're stuck. Then he'll meet you where you are at to show you what to do." Some participants, with higher level technology skills, shared that they worked with digital navigators on highly-specific tasks or particular software programs. In one instance, the participant shared that the digital navigator "got familiar with the [point-of-sale] system. He'll give information, 'if this happens again, this is what you do…' or he'll provide resources, like a website or contact. After that, I got it. He'd show me tricks and trades of the POS system."

Benefits of the digital navigator programs extended beyond those who received direct services to their family members and others in the community

Numerous examples of the wide reaching impacts of the NDNC digital navigator programs surfaced through participant impact stories and the subset study focus groups. Not only did participants benefit from improved technology access and skills, but those supports created ripple effects, enabling many participants to then engage with and help others in their family or community. A participant, who is a college student and who also works for a Native-led organization, summed up the impacts of receiving a computer as, "It has impacted my family because it takes a load off of them–they don't have to save up and get me a laptop. [It has impacted] my community, who will gain a future educator, after completing my degree. And also the work I do is community based, so I'm also able to effectively do my job for the Tribal communities."

One of the focus group participants was the director of a rural library where digital navigator services were offered by an NDNC subgrantee. In addition to providing a space for the digital navigator to meet with participants, this person also participated in the technology skills classes themselves. "I took the digital navigator program to improve my skills so I could help my library patrons with their computer needs. Many of our patrons come to the library to use our computers. Some of our patrons have experience using a computer, but there are many who have no experience at all. By taking this course, I am now able to answer any questions my patrons might have, and better assist them with their computer needs."

Participants built connections with digital navigators in addition to digital skills

In describing their experiences working with digital navigators, participants made clear how much they valued not only the support they received, but the people providing it. The impact stories and focus groups describe the NDNC digital navigator cohort as an empathetic, skilled, and highly-valued group who are viewed as important resources in their communities.

One participant noted, "This program was very beneficial and the digital navigator's customer service was awesome. He took extra time to explain and went out of his way

to ensure I understood how to use the device I was given through the program. Definitely planning on using more of this programs services in the future."

When describing the approach of the digital navigator they worked with, one focus group participant explained, "with people at different levels, she was really patient about how she could help each individual not feel overwhelmed, because it was overwhelming for some of the older people. But she was really patient, and she helped them in a way that they didn't feel like, 'oh, this is just too much for me.'"

Impacts to National Digital Navigator Corps Sites

A core feature of NDNC is the extension of digital navigator services into rural and Tribal communities to provide wraparound digital inclusion services where such resources had previously been limited or nonexistent. The program sought to do this by increasing the capacity of established community-based organizations that had strong existing relationships and community trust, and in many cases that were already direct service providers, whether digital inclusion services or other social support programs.

Changes in subgrantee capacity to provide digital inclusion services

Outcome 3: Increase the capacity of 11 local rural organizations and 7 local Tribal communities to connect community members with affordable broadband access, personal devices that meet the needs of the user and access to basic and advanced digital literacy training.

Most subgrantees were engaged in some digital inclusion work before NDNC

Four of the 18 subgrantees offered digital navigator services prior to participating in NDNC (Table 9). The grant allowed these organizations to expand capacity by hiring additional digital navigators and in the case of Computer Reach and National Digital Equity Center, expanding services to targeted rural areas.

Another five subgrantees offered no digital inclusion services prior to participating in NDNC. Three of these organizations, CBAN, HVPUD, and JNet, had previously been focused on broadband infrastructure deployment, so digital inclusion represented a new component to their work helping residents access the internet. For the other two, digital inclusion work was a new undertaking.

The other half of subgrantees did not have prior digital navigator experience, but did provide some other form of digital inclusion services such as public computing labs, digital skills training, or technical support. A few of these organizations had existing

standalone technology support programs, such as Easter Seals of Greater Houston, which offered digital skills training for people with disabilities and their caregivers through a resource they developed called BridgingApps. However, most provided technology support as an extension of other services they offered to existing clients. For example, Community Service Programs of West Alabama provided computer access and assistance to housing counseling clients who needed help completing required online education courses (e.g., homebuyer education, mortgage delinquency education).

Table 9: Digital Navigator Capacity Prior to NDNC

Had Digital Navigator Services Prior to NDNC	Had Digital Inclusion Services Prior to NDNC, but not Digital Navigators	Had No Digital Inclusion Services Prior to NDNC
• Computer Reach • NDEC • Pottsboro Area Public Library	• Cherokee Nation • CSPWAL • ESGH • DCI • HAPCAP • Lummi Indian Business Council • NOCAC • SOAR • WSU - Grays Harbor	• AFN • CNS • CBAN • Forest County Broadband Committee • HVPUD • JNet

Most intend to continue providing digital inclusion services after its completion, although what the work looks like may change

Through their site evaluations and staff self-assessments, every subgrantee organization affirmed the value of their digital navigator program to the community, and each expressed a desire to continue offering digital navigator services. As shown in Table 10, four subgrantees plan to continue or even expand their digital navigator programs after the NDNC grant ends, compared to just three that plan to cease offering digital inclusion services after NDNC. Most subgrantees (11) intend to adapt their approaches in order to continue offering some level of digital inclusion support services, even if they are unable to continue supporting a digital navigator.

The availability of sustainable funding appears to be the single differentiating factor between those organizations whose programs will continue and those whose will not. When discussing the need to wind-down digital navigator functions, subgrantees

emphasized the value of the services, described efforts to find alternative funding sources, and noted that they would maintain their digital navigators if funding were available. Similarly, those adapting their programs cited funding challenges as their reason for doing so. These subgrantees are finding creative ways to maintain what they deem to be crucial services by scaling back the scope of digital inclusion services or absorbing digital navigator functions into other existing roles. As described previously, subset study participants Cherokee Nation and Hoopa Valley Public Utility District intend to continue some digital navigator functions by shifting digital navigators into new positions within their organizations, where they will maintain community-facing roles and the ability to provide some ongoing technology support.

The following examples from site evaluation reports describe how two subgrantees characterized the current funding reality and what it means for digital inclusion work in their organizations and communities:

"We will be taking a break from this work to show the void in this area due to the cut in funds. This void needs to be seen and felt by all stakeholders to show the value of these programs." - Washington State University Extension Grays Harbor County

". . . to be as efficient as possible with reduced staffing we will be focusing on our hotspot program which has device funding secured for another year, and through our partnership with AT&T hosting additional laptop distribution events. . . we will lean on our internal volunteer community for distribution events and the hotspot distribution will continue at less frequent intervals. Our DN services will look different, but they will not stop." - Cherokee Nation

Table 10: Plans for Digital Navigator Services After NDNC Program

Plan to Continue or Expand Digital Navigator Services	Plan to Offer Some Form of Modified Digital Inclusion Support	No Plan to Continue Digital Navigator or Digital Inclusion Services
• CSPWAL • DCI • JNet • SOAR	• Cherokee Nation • Computer Reach • CBAN • ESGH • Forest County Broadband Committee • HAPCAP • HVPUD • Lummi Indian Business Council • NDEC • NOCAC • Pottsboro Area Public Library	• AFN • CNS • WSU - Grays Harbor

Changes in partnerships and community awareness for subgrantees

Building awareness and trust was a slow but valuable process

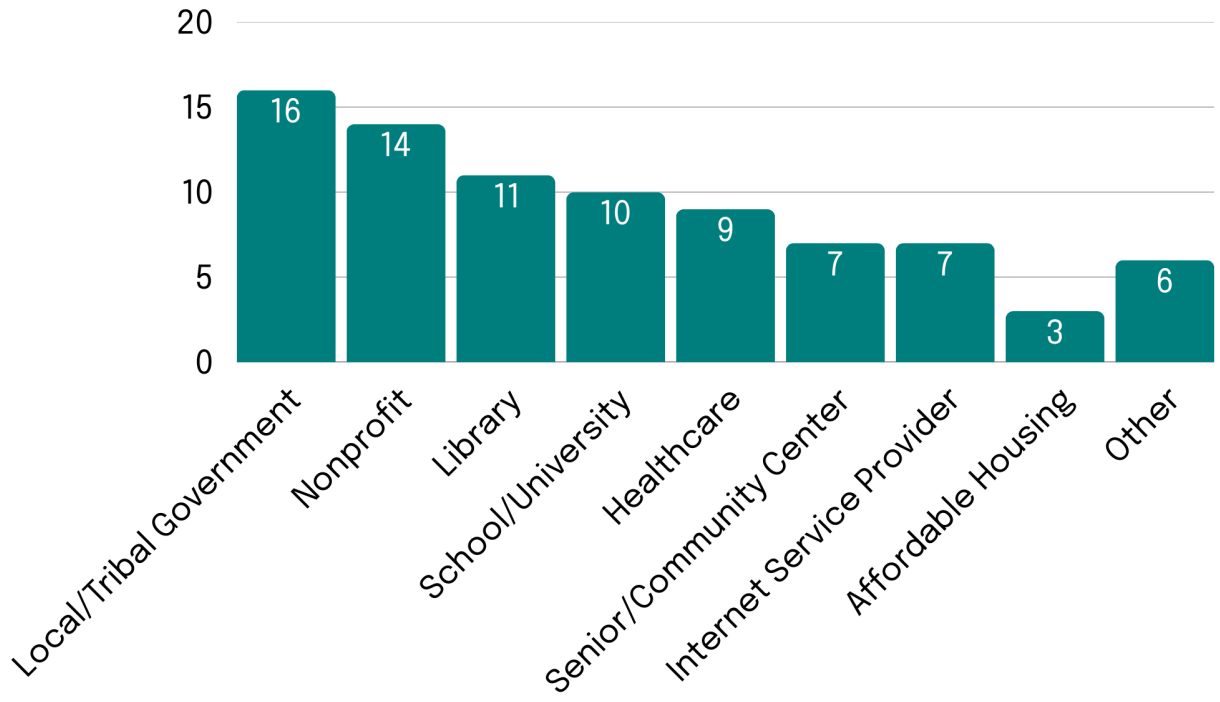
In their self-assessments, 9 of 16 program managers and 10 of 18 digital navigators who submitted responses cited building relationships and trust with partner organizations, community members, and even staff within their own organizations as one of the biggest challenges faced. A few mentioned that their large geographic service area contributed to outreach challenges, and some noted that potential partner organizations were hesitant to engage initially due to a lack of understanding about the digital navigator program or their own capacity challenges.

During the subset study interviews, one digital navigator summarized the experience of trying to work with community members and partners that were unfamiliar with concepts of digital inclusion and were thus slow to engage, "[We serve] a demographic of people that don't really understand what digital literacy is or digital equity issues are. . . I would say, it's just slow and just trying to let people understand, and really just getting the point across of who I am, what I'm here for, [and] how I can be of assistance." They also mentioned that distributing hotspots and devices to

community members created an opportunity for initial engagement, which could then open the door to providing additional support.

While building relationships and trust with partner organizations posed a challenge for many subgrantees, particularly early in the NDNC program, all but two subgrantee site evaluations discussed the value of the partnerships that were developed or strengthened over the course of the NDNC program. Several NDNC staff also remarked that the partnerships they built were among the most successful aspects of the program. Figure 14 displays the number of NDNC subgrantees that had partnerships with each organization type.

Figure 14: NDNC Subgrantee Partners by Type



Out of 16 subgrantee organizations reporting partner information in site evaluation reports

Successful outreach strategies varied greatly between sites

While building awareness about their digital navigator programs was a consistent challenge and priority for the subgrantees, the outreach strategies that worked best varied significantly across sites. Table 11 shows the percent of program participants that learned about the digital navigator programs through various outreach channels. Across all digital navigator programs, referral sources are spread relatively evenly

across the four most common strategies (external agency, advertising/marketing, internal, and family/friend). External agency referrals are the most common source overall, but very high percentages for a few subgrantees drive that number up.

Interestingly, most organizations relied heavily on one outreach strategy to attract participants, but which strategy varies across sites. Given the challenges that subgrantees noted with developing new partnerships and reaching participants initially, this might suggest that most doubled-down once they found a strategy that worked. It also illustrates the highly localized nature of digital navigator services and the importance of specific community context and relationships.

Table 11: How Program Participants Learned About Digital Navigator Programs

	Advertising/ marketing	External Agency/ Organization Referral	Friend/ Family Referral	Internal Referral	Website	Outreach Event	Multiple Channels
ALL GRANTEES	**21.7%**	**32.1%**	**19.6%**	**20.7%**	**2.0%**	**3.2%**	**0.7%**
AFN	17.6%	36.5%	41.2%	4.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
CNS	25.1%	16.7%	48.5%	5.8%	3.8%	0.0%	0.0%
Cherokee Nation	0.0%	33.3%	20.8%	45.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
CBAN	47.9%	18.9%	7.1%	4.1%	0.0%	13.0%	8.9%
Computer Reach	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
CSPWAL	8.5%	19.1%	44.4%	21.4%	6.6%	0.0%	0.0%
DCI	46.1%	15.1%	3.7%	34.7%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%
ESGH	71.2%	10.1%	7.7%	9.3%	1.6%	0.0%	0.0%
Forest County Broadband Committee	5.8%	21.8%	65.3%	7.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
HAPCAP	12.8%	68.9%	7.3%	9.6%	1.4%	0.0%	0.0%
HVPUD	12.1%	0.4%	1.3%	41.7%	8.7%	35.7%	0.0%
JNet	61.0%	14.0%	15.8%	2.0%	0.0%	0.0%	7.2%
Lummi Indian Business Council	13.3%	4.4%	47.2%	33.5%	1.6%	0.0%	0.0%
NDEC	0.5%	16.7%	2.9%	80.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
NOCAC	9.9%	50.5%	6.3%	30.9%	2.4%	0.0%	0.0%
Pottsboro Area Public Library	34.4%	29.4%	20.9%	14.7%	0.6%	0.0%	0.0%
SOAR	24.8%	61.5%	3.1%	10.2%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%
WSU - Grays Harbor	44.9%	40.2%	6.3%	8.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Note: Percentages are out of program participants that shared how they learned about the digital navigator program, rather than out of total program participants

Hiring and retaining digital navigators presented capacity challenges

Over the course of the NDNC program 12 digital navigators chose to leave their position at some point in the project, the majority of whom found other employment opportunities that better aligned with their career goals, paid higher salaries, or were not time-limited by short-term grant funding. Only three digital navigators left the

position because it was not a good fit. In their self assessments, program managers from five subgrantee organizations cited finding strong digital navigator candidates initially and turnover of digital navigators as one of the most significant challenges their organization faced over the course of the program.

Changes in subgrantee digital equity expertise

Outcome 4: Increase digital equity expertise at AMERIND and within the 18 host organizations.

Digital equity training and support provided to subgrantees

Given the variation in prior digital inclusion experience among the subgrantees and the number of new staff hired to serve as digital navigators under the NDNC program, a heavy emphasis was placed on developing the digital equity expertise of the cohort. To prepare the subgrantees to implement the comprehensive digital inclusion supports that a digital navigator program offers, and to support continued development of their digital equity expertise, NDIA incorporated several forms of training and professional development into the NDNC program.

An initial eight hour training was held over four weeks in late 2022 which covered an orientation to the National Digital Navigator Corps for all program staff at each organization, an introduction to the digital divide, and strategies for establishing a strong digital navigator program and providing excellent digital navigator support. Each digital navigator that started the position after the initial training received an individual orientation with NDIA and AMERIND staff and was required to review the initial training recordings and materials. Ongoing professional development was provided to digital navigators through cohort meetings held weekly in 2023 and then twice monthly from January 2024 to May 2025, to program managers in monthly meetings, and to data managers in twice monthly meetings. These meetings included peer support among the cohort and professional development and technical assistance from NDIA and AMERIND staff as well as program advisors, mentors, and other digital inclusion experts. Six full cohort gatherings were held with all organizational program staff (i.e. digital navigators, program managers, and data managers) with expert presentations and interactive discussions to go in-depth on a topic such as developing a vision for digital equity, advocacy, program evaluation, and digital inclusion in rural and Native communities. Mentors from established digital navigator

programs met with digital navigators and program managers individually for additional technical assistance and professional development throughout the pilot.

In addition to training provided directly to the NDNC cohort, AMERIND's Digital Inclusion Manager led numerous trainings, workshops, webinars, and presentations on digital inclusion and Indian Country. Some highlights include being a key instructor at 15 Tribal Broadband Bootcamps, organizing and facilitating expert panels at Net Inclusion 2024 and 2025, delivering a plenary at Net Inclusion 2025, leading NDIA's staff in an Indian Country 101 to support relevant digital inclusion in Native communities, presenting at the Congress of American Indians' Annual Conference 2023 and 2024, speaking on Building for Digital Equity's livestream events, and presenting at two of AMERIND's Annual Conferences. She also established a community of practice for Indigenous Digital Inclusion practitioners called the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Working Groups that she hosted in monthly meetings and provided updates on digital inclusion tailored to the Native audience.

Digital equity expertise increased among subgrantees

In their self-assessments, subgrantee program managers and digital navigators were asked to rate their organizations' expertise at delivering digital inclusion services at the beginning and at the end of the NDNC initiative, on a scale of 1-10, to measure their perceived gains in expertise over the course of the program. Across 16 program managers and 18 digital navigators who completed self-assessments, the program managers tended to rate their organizations' expertise lower at the start but perceived greater gains over the course of the programs. The average score for digital inclusion expertise at the start of the program was 4.1 for program managers and 5.9 for digital navigators. By the end of the program, program managers gave an average rating of 8.6 and digital navigators gave an average rating of 8.9. Combined, 28 of the 34 program managers and digital navigators reported a positive change in their organizations' digital equity expertise, five reported no change, and one indicated a negative change in their expertise. Among those who reported a positive change, their perceived expertise increased by an average of 4.6 points.

When asked to describe the most visible ways that their organizations' digital equity expertise changed during the NDNC program, the most common ways cited by digital navigators were that they gained greater empathy and understanding of the digital inclusion needs of community members, and that they gained the confidence and

experience to develop their own tools, resources, and processes to deliver services more effectively. In response to the same question, program managers pointed to increased visibility and demand for digital navigator services, success at attracting and engaging with new partners (both internal and external to their organizations), and improved understanding and responsiveness to community needs.

The NDNC grant funded the creation of a dedicated Digital Inclusion Manager position at AMERIND. In addition to helping lead the NDNC program and more generally supporting the growth of digital inclusion work among Native organizations, this position was also intended to establish AMERIND as a digital equity leader among Native-led organizations by infusing knowledge and a commitment to digital inclusion work throughout the organization. Staff with AMERIND were also asked to rate their organization's expertise in delivering digital inclusion services at the start and end of the NDNC program as part of their self-assessments. All three AMERIND staff that submitted self-assessments indicated that their organization's digital equity expertise increased over the course of the program. On average, they rated AMERIND's expertise at the start of NDNC at 5.3, compared to an average score of 8.7 at the end. Since the start of NDNC, AMERIND engagement in digital inclusion programs and activities grew to include attending and presenting at NDIA's Net Inclusion conference, facilitating an ongoing Indigenous Digital Inclusion Working Group, presenting about digital inclusion at Tribal Broadband Bootcamps and numerous Indigenous conferences, and partnering with NDIA to administer the Seven Star Communities program–a program to recognize Native governments and Native-led organizations leading the way in digital inclusion work. However, the majority of this work was led by AMERIND's Digital Inclusion Manager and there has been limited integration of digital inclusion work into other roles or functions of the organization. Similar to the digital navigator roles at many of the subgrantees, AMERIND's dedicated digital inclusion position ended with the completion of the NDNC grant. While AMERIND continues to be a close partner of NDIA and remains an advocate for digital inclusion work in Indian country, the loss of a dedicated digital inclusion role limits the remaining staff's ability to prioritize this work going forward.

Changes in subgrantee capacity for data collection and management

Outcome 5: Build the digital equity data collection and analysis expertise of 18 host organizations.

Along with developing the capacity and expertise of subgrantees to deliver digital navigation services, the NDNC program sought to develop their ability to collect and analyze data about their programs. Building data collection and analysis expertise was intended to help subgrantees track participant interactions and progress, monitor and improve program effectiveness, and document and communicate the impacts of their digital navigator programs.

Using an iterative co-design process, NDIA developed a digital navigator data platform (DN Data Platform) in Airtable to capture program data from each of the subgrantees. The subgrantees provided input on the initial design and ongoing refinements to the data fields and functionality of the DN Data Platform template. Each subgrantee then received their own distinct instance of the DN Data Platform, accessible only to staff at their organization and NDIA and AMERIND staff administering the NDNC program, to use for data collection over the course of NDNC. This was done to protect data sovereignty and privacy for each subgrantee and the community members they serve, and to allow organizations to customize the Data Platform to the nuances of their programs, within the parameters of the NDNC reporting requirements. Each site also entered into a data sharing agreement with NDIA detailing acceptable access and uses of the NDNC program data and DN Data Platform.

Data collection and analysis training and support provided to subgrantees

The subgrantees entered the NDNC program with vastly different levels of data collection experience–some had established systems and practices for collecting and analyzing program data, while others had no prior data collection or analysis experience. To encourage consistent reporting across all sites, NDIA established data collection standards and responsibilities for the data manager role, and provided ongoing training and support. The following timeline describes the data collection and evaluation activities and training the subgrantees engaged during the NDNC program:

- **October-December 2022** - Initial meetings with data managers to outline their responsibilities and gather input from subgrantees on data collection strategies and priorities; NDIA also evaluated potential software platforms for the DN Data Platform, ultimately selecting Airtable.
- **January-March 2023** - Iterative co-design of the DN data platform with input from subgrantees; live virtual training sessions on Airtable functionality and management for subgrantee staff (trainings were recorded so that staff could refer back to them and for onboarding of new staff); NDIA signed data sharing agreements with each subgrantee.
- **April 2023** - Pilot set of subgrantees tested the DN Data Platform and monthly reporting forms; bi-monthly data manager meeting cadence established, with meetings alternating between monthly training and updates and monthly office hours for one-on-one support from NDIA staff; subgrantee reporting requirements and data manager responsibilities finalized.
- **May 2023-August 2025** - Ongoing program data collection and monthly reporting by all subgrantees; NDIA provides data management support through bi-monthly data manager meetings and on-demand technical assistance; new subgrantee staff trained on DN Data Platform and data collection requirements as needed; updates and new functionality added to DN Data Platform as needed.
- **March 2025** - Digital navigator program evaluation template (see Appendix) shared with subgrantees, along with expectations for summative program evaluations for each site; data managers trained on how to compile necessary programmatic and community demographic data for program evaluations.
- **April-September 2025** - Data manager meetings focus on cleanup and analysis of program data for evaluation reports; subgrantees complete program evaluations; NDIA transfers digital navigator program data to subgrantees per data sharing agreements.

Priority on participant privacy and data sovereignty

While participant data privacy is an important consideration for any direct service program, there was a heightened focus on data privacy and ownership for NDNC. Several of the Tribal subgrantees needed to ensure data sovereignty for their organization and the community members participating in their digital navigator program. Beyond protecting personally identifiable information (PII) and other

sensitive data, data sovereignty is the concept that individuals (and Indigenous communities) have not only ownership but the ability to self-determine how and what data about them is collected and used. As described above, each subgrantee received its own distinct Data Platform, accessible only to subgrantee staff and select NDIA and AMERIND staff. Additionally, the data sharing and confidentiality agreements executed between NDIA and each subgrantee specified that all data entered into the DN Data Platform was owned by the subgrantee organization and that they were granting temporary access to NDIA and AMERIND for specific purposes related to NDNC. The agreements further stipulated that, upon completion of all NDNC activities, NDIA would transfer all to the subgrantees and NDIA and AMERIND would cease to have access to the data.

Changes in data collection and analysis expertise among subgrantees

In their self-assessments, data managers were asked to rate their organizations' data expertise at the beginning and at the end of the NDNC initiative, on a scale of 1-10, to measure their perceived gains in expertise over the course of the program. The average score for data expertise at the start of the program was 5.5 compared to 8.1 at the end of the program. In fact, of the 18 respondents (representing 16 subgrantee organizations), 13 reported a positive change in their organization's expertise at collecting and managing data about program clients and services, five reported no change, and zero reported a negative change. Among the 13 respondents who reported a positive change, the self-assessed score from the beginning to the end of the program increased by an average of 3.5 points.

When asked how their organization's data expertise changed over the course of NDNC, half of the data manager self-assessments said that the program helped them formalize or refine their data collection processes. About one-third of NDNC grantee site evaluation reports also noted that their organizational data collection processes became more standardized and consistent over the course of the program. When asked what activities were most impactful for building data expertise, "learning by doing" was cited by 55% of data managers, followed by "support & training provided by NDIA," which was cited by 50% of data managers.

Four of the five subgrantees that reported no change in data expertise over the life of the program rated their beginning and ending data expertise as 7 or higher out of 10. Based on their initially high scores and comments from their self-assessments, we

can infer that these organizations came into the program with strong established data collection and analysis capabilities.

Consistent and standardized data collection presented an ongoing challenge

Despite the training and resources provided to subgrantees, and ongoing support through regular data manager meetings, there were significant consistency and quality disparities in the data collected across subgrantees.

Data related to service delivery and participant interactions, such as participant intake data, participant goals, session tracking, and device distributions were consistently collected by most of the subgrantees. For example, 15 of 18 subgrantees tracked data on sessions for 70% or more of their participants. Documentation of participant goals was less consistent but still regularly collected, with 11 sites recording at least one goal for 70% or more of their participants.

However, more in-depth data collection functions of the DN Data Platform intended to measure the outcomes and impacts of the digital navigator program–skills assessments and participant follow-up surveys–were implemented inconsistently at best. Three subgrantees recorded at least one skills assessment with 75% or more of program participants, while nine subgrantees conducted them with fewer than 10% of participants. Only one site, Community Service Programs of West Alabama, successfully administered pre- and post-skill assessments (necessary to measure participant progress) at any meaningful scale. They recorded two or more skill assessments for 17% (105 of 632) of participants.

Participant follow-up survey data was even more sparse. Only Lummi Indian Business Council had any success gathering follow-up surveys, collecting 52 from their 275 participants (19%). No other site gathered follow-up surveys from more than 4% of participants.

Challenges with data collection were both technical and programmatic

Several (6) digital navigators and data managers expressed difficulties learning to use Airtable, and five digital navigators felt that the amount of data to be collected from participants and reported in the DN Data Platform was too onerous. One digital

navigator shared that “Patrons were not always comfortable filling out several surveys” while another noted that “With only one digital navigator, the traveling between all of our sites and data input became a lot while focusing on patrons’ needs. Manageable, but at times difficult.”

A few subgrantees had established digital navigator programs with data collection processes in place prior to NDNC. These organizations faced some common challenges with the NDNC data collection and reporting processes, namely difficulty mapping required reporting fields for NDNC to their existing data collection practices, and duplication of effort to capture data in Airtable as well as their organization’s chosen data collection platform. One data manager described the greatest challenge with the NDNC program as, “Airtable and how the categories did not work with our data collection categories. The need to do double-entry was simply unavoidable.” This resulted in increased data collection and reporting burdens for some sites, while others opted not to use elements of the DN Data Platform at all. When designing data collection and reporting requirements for multi-site grant programs, grantors should consider ways to balance standardization across sites with accommodating established systems that grantee organizations may already have in place to reduce reporting burdens.

Along with capacity and system integration challenges, the decision to co-create the digital navigator Data Platform and data collection requirements with subgrantees contributed to a lack of clarity regarding particular data collection and reporting requirements. While some data collection processes, such as required fields at intake and documentation of sessions and device distributions, were clearly defined, others gave more discretion to the subgrantees. For example, digital navigators were encouraged to consider participant needs and context when deciding when to administer skills assessments, and sites were given options for when and how to distribute follow-up surveys. Along with this flexibility came confusion and ultimately inconsistent applications of these tools, which limited the ability to assess key program impacts like skill-building and participant satisfaction for individual sites and across the NDNC subgrantees.

Despite the data collection challenges some sites experienced, those that implemented consistent data collection and analysis practices found that they were able to leverage their program data to improve service delivery and communicate about the value of their digital navigator programs. One digital navigator characterized

the value of building organizational data expertise as follows, *"We developed clearer processes, collected better data on digital barriers, and used that information to better serve our community."*

Leadership opportunities and professional development

Outcome 2: Provide an opportunity for local people to serve their community as Digital Navigators, thereby creating a leadership pipeline in rural and tribal communities.

Leveraging local expertise was a priority

All subgrantee organizations sought to hire for their NDNC digital navigator positions from within the communities they serve, emphasizing local knowledge and community connections for their digital navigators. Five subgrantees filled their digital navigator positions with existing staff at their organizations for at least a portion of the grant period, although each of these also described opening the position externally. In their site evaluation reports, subgrantees described the locally-focused recruitment efforts they undertook to hire their digital navigators, including outreach to partner organizations, advertising on social media and in community newsletters, and conducting interviews at local job fairs. In describing their hiring process, one subgrantee explained, "[They] did not have any specific experience as a Digital Navigator, however had worked in IT while serving in the Army and provided individual support to vulnerable populations through ministry experience in rural [areas of the state]."

Digital navigators emphasized the value of building durable career skills

As part of the self-assessment, digital navigators were asked to reflect on the most valuable skills and knowledge they gained, how their experiences as digital navigators may help with future career and personal goals, and any lessons they would pass along to other digital navigators. The responses to these questions 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. That so many digital navigators identified these as valuable skills to their future personal and professional growth speaks in part to the type of people

recruited for these roles and their existing connections and perspectives on community-based work coming into the role. However, it also suggests that through their NDNC experience, many digital navigators developed and deepened their roles as trusted partners, resources, and leaders in their communities, and that they envision working for and with members of their communities as an important component of future career steps.

An essential factor in leadership development and career longevity, about one-third of digital navigators also shared that they learned to better recognize and work within their own limitations and capacity. A few emphasized the importance of asking for help, establishing boundaries, and seeking support to avoid burnout. One digital navigator described using limitations as an opportunity to connect, "Admitting the gaps in your own knowledge is one of the quickest ways you're able to build rapport with a community member, and gives you the opportunity to learn alongside them."

When asked what other types of support for professional and leadership development they would recommend be provided in future programs, 10 of 16 digital navigator respondents said the support and training provided fully met their needs and that they have no additional recommendations. Among the suggestions that were offered, three respondents noted that communications training, such as public speaking and effectively communicating with media, policymakers, leaders, would be helpful. This was the only additional type of support recommended by multiple respondents.

Digital navigators gained leadership experience within their communities and on a national level

All NDNC digital navigators received professional development training on storytelling, advocacy, and presenting at conferences to prepare them for success in leadership opportunities. Each digital navigator also gave a presentation at the NDNC preconference at NDIA's Net Inclusion Conference in 2023. Seventeen members of the NDNC cohort participated in panels or presented during sessions at the full Net Inclusion Conference between 2023 and 2025. Digital navigators also led workshops on digital inclusion at Tribal Broadband Bootcamps and the National Tribal Telecommunications Association Conference alongside AMERIND staff. Staff from thirteen subgrantees, with support from NDIA team members, also participated in activities to educate local, state, and national elected officials and policymakers about the importance and value of digital inclusion work, including participating in the

Connect 20 Summit in 2023 and a Hill Day with Congressional representatives in 2025. Multiple digital navigators were featured in local and national media to promote their work and were panelists on national webinars. While the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) was active, NDNC digital navigators shared valuable insight on the program's effectiveness and challenges, which impacted NDIA's practitioner support and policy strategies. NDNC digital navigators also provided feedback directly to the user experience team working with the Federal Communications Commission on ACP and the Universal Service Administrative Company's Tribal support team, which led to changes in the application and validation processes for the program.

Digital navigators are seen as core to their organizations' mission

All four of the subgrantee organizations that were part of the subset study intend to retain their digital navigators in some role following completion of the NDNC program, although the path is clearer for some than others. Interviewees at all four organizations noted that the digital navigator role and services have become important enough to their organizational priorities and the communities they serve that they are finding ways to continue offering these services. SOAR is expanding their digital skills programming with the launch of the Appalachian Digital Career Academy, and their DN will take on a greater leadership role within this new initiative while continuing to provide digital navigation and skills training services. The DNs at both the HVPUD and Cherokee Nation will transition to new technical support roles within their organizations. While these roles will entail new responsibilities, they both involve interfacing with community members and will have elements of digital navigation incorporated. CSPWAL is still exploring how the DN role can be incorporated into the organization going forward.

Strengthening Tribal and Rural Partnerships

Outcome 9: NDIA will be a more effective partner with rural and Tribal organizations advocating for digital inclusion resources and policy changes.

NDIA's understanding of and partnership with rural and Tribal communities has increased considerably

Since the start of NDNC, and due in large part to the partnerships established with AMERIND and the subgrantees, NDIA has significantly expanded its work with rural and Tribal organizations and communities. The NDIA Affiliate community includes more than 40 Native organizations; and while organizations are not specifically identified as rural in NDIA's Affiliate database, anecdotally the number of NDIA Affiliates that serve rural areas has increased as well. While the NDNC program was being implemented, NDIA undertook numerous efforts to grow partnerships and support for rural and Tribal organizations:

- NDIA established and continues to support the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Working Group, a monthly Zoom call for Indigenous digital inclusion practitioners to convene, discuss their work, and learn from each other.
- In 2023 and 2024, NDIA supported the creation of Community Connectivity Plans in more than 30 Appalachian communities through Connect Humanity's Appalachia Digital Accelerator Program–a program funded by the Appalachian Regional Commission to improve broadband access and digital equity in Appalachia's least connected communities.
- In 2024, NDIA and AMERIND launched the Seven Star Communities program to recognize Tribal governments and Native-led organizations leading the way in digital inclusion work. The program shines a spotlight on awardees and promotes knowledge sharing among Native entities by compiling and publishing digital inclusion resources submitted as part of the application process. The inaugural class of Seven Star Communities included eight awardee organizations.

- NDIA worked closely with NDNC subgrantee Gila River Telecommunications, Inc. to host Net Inclusion 2025, NDIA's annual conference, in the Gila River Indian Community. This was the first time the conference had been held on Tribal land, and Native work and stories were heavily featured throughout, including Indigenous-focused breakout sessions, site visits to digital inclusion programs on the Reservation, and a reception for the Seven Star Community awardees.
- Since the beginning of NDNC, NDIA staff, in partnership with AMERIND, have presented and led trainings on digital inclusion at numerous Tribal Broadband Bootcamps and Native conferences.

There is room for NDIA to continue learning & building relationships with rural and Tribal partners

In the self-assessments that NDIA and AMERIND staff members completed, respondents were asked "How effective is NDIA as a partner to rural & Tribal communities in advocating for digital inclusion resources and policy changes?" The average rating that AMERIND staff gave was 7 out of 10, while the average rating that NDIA staff gave was 8.5 out of 10. In fact, all of the NDIA staff ratings were higher than all of the AMERIND ratings for this question. This suggests that, while NDIA is seen as a strong partner to rural and Tribal communities, the organization's perceived effectiveness in this respect is inflated compared to that of external partners.

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. One subgrantee program manager noted that NDIA's work has become more policy-driven, which poses a risk for their organization as they work hard to be seen as nonpartisan. Specifically, being asked to participate in events like Digital Inclusion Week or Congressional visits raised concerns with this program manager about their organization being associated with other NDIA Affiliates that take more aggressive political positions that are in opposition to some of their local partners and stakeholders.

Tribal subgrantees also recommended that NDIA must maintain and grow its partnerships with Native-led organizations to continue effectively supporting digital inclusion work in Native communities, a sentiment multiple NDIA staff members also shared in their self-assessments. One program manager with a Tribal subgrantee specifically recommended having a Native person affiliated with NDIA to lead any future Tribal initiatives. Another program manager explained:

"I would say more Native American communities could be recruited to participate in digital inclusion . . . Tribal entities can be a little resistant cause we are promised so many things and sometimes it never happens, so working with our people you need to be honest and show them how you can assist. Basically don't make too many promises."

Strengthening and Sharing the Digital Navigator Model

Outcome 7: Strengthen the Digital Navigator Model, documenting and disseminating lessons learned, particularly as pertains to use of the model in rural and Tribal areas.

A primary goal of the NDNC program was to expand the digital navigator model to test its implementation in rural and Tribal communities. Throughout the grant period, NDIA developed various resources informed by the experiences of the 18 NDNC sites. These resources, including the Digital Navigator Logic Model, Digital Inclusion Manual, and Digital Navigator Program Toolkit, address the challenges, barriers, and opportunities encountered, ensuring the continued growth, evolution, and effectiveness of the digital navigator model in meeting specific community needs.

Changes to the model

Guidance to hire and staff the digital navigator programs

The grant program included funding for a full-time digital navigator and partial funding for program manager and data manager positions at each subgrantee organization. To define the responsibilities and help subgrantees staff these positions, NDIA updated the previously developed digital navigator job description, and created program manager and data manager job descriptions. The job descriptions outline the duties and responsibilities of each position, which are required to implement and manage the digital navigator program effectively.

Managing expectations and responsibilities placed on digital navigators

While their main responsibility was to work with community members to provide information on available internet options, determine the type of device needed, train them on its use, and offer digital skills, digital navigators had to simultaneously manage many other tasks to implement and grow the digital navigator program. They were tasked with creating and strengthening partnerships with social service providers and other community-based organizations to build awareness of the digital navigator services and drive referrals. While NDIA provided sample marketing materials

and a social media toolkit, often, the sites needed to create their own promotional materials. Digital navigators needed to network and present their digital navigator program at local events. Further, digital navigators become the face of their program both locally and nationally. They were asked to promote their work at various conferences and events and to meet with their elected leaders in Washington, DC for Capitol Hill visits. Some sites were part of a digital inclusion coalition and other collaborations, which required additional time commitment and effort to support that work. These responsibilities often exceeded their capacity. As a result of this learning, NDIA put recommendations in place for digital navigator programs to incorporate additional staff support for the digital navigator program that falls outside of the three previously defined roles–digital navigator, data manager and program manager–supported in the NDNC pilot to include support for communications, partnerships, and media relations. This is also documented in NDIA's Standards for Digital Navigators and Digital Navigator Programs, developed based on learnings from the NDNC pilot.

Increased training and professional development support

As the role of digital navigators evolved and NDIA identified areas that needed more training and professional development, the range and depth of the training provided to digital navigators was expanded. Training was adapted to ensure digital navigators could meet the needs of their position and to help prepare them for future career opportunities. Training was provided by NDIA, Public Knowledge, the Institute for Local Self Reliance, the American Indian Policy Institute, and other partners. Supplemental training sessions were open to the entire NDNC cohort and covered the following topics:

- Affordable Connectivity Program
- Partnering with Tribal Communities
- Indigenous Digital Sovereignty
- Podcasting and Writing for Digital Inclusion Advocates
- Developing Advocacy Skills
- Broadband Basics
- History of Broadband Policy
- Using Broadband Labels and Low cost Internet Plans with Community Members

- Planning for Digital Inclusion Week
- Storytelling
- Working with the Media
- Succession and Growth Planning
- How to work within the Broadband Policymaking Ecosystem
- Marketing and Outreach Strategies

Updated training curriculum to include more information on available resources and best practices for digital navigators

These trainings included topics on how to make digital navigator sessions conversational, boundary setting with community members, scheduling digital navigator appointments, accessibility tools and resources, working with digital inclusion coalitions, using the Northstar Digital Literacy assessment, Tribal Broadband Bootcamp, working with older adults, device distribution, preparing for NDIA's Net Inclusion Conference, and trauma-informed care for Digital Navigators. NDIA also held two NDNC pre-conference events at Net Inclusion 2023 and 2024 for sites to receive additional training, share resources and provide updates on their digital navigator programs.

Additional guidance for device distribution

The NDNC program was designed to integrate device distribution within individualized support. Digital navigators were trained to identify client device needs and provide a free device when appropriate. Device distribution was intended to be flexible enough to meet individual needs, while prioritizing large-screen device ownership. NDNC sites struggled with this lack of structure and sought to establish their own parameters and processes for device distribution. Some sites felt they needed concrete policies regarding requirements and qualifications to receive devices, in order to prevent abuse of the program. Others weren't sure how to acquire devices, balancing cost and performance in a way that would allow their program to distribute more devices while meeting the needs of the clients. Some sites required different levels of flexibility to meet their community needs, such as hotspots for a few clients who were not reached by wireline internet service or cellphones, to address critical needs in remote areas.

NDIA learned that digital navigator programs need more upfront guidance on designing the device distribution component of their program. NDNC sites received additional support from Digitunity to establish sustainable partnerships with local refurbishers and vendors and were encouraged to share resources such as device distribution policies with their peers, processes, and paperwork. In future digital navigator training and projects, NDIA will include additional attention to device distribution plans early in collaborative program design, leveraging the lessons learned and examples shared in NDNC to walk through a broader range of scenarios, including learn-to-earn programs, device distribution events, and distribution of other devices and peripherals as needed.

When NDNC sites hosted device distribution events, they had large turnouts. Often, once community members received their device, they would not request additional support for digital navigator services. Some sites, including Computer Reach, provided a year of service for their devices to support the community members' use of the devices. Because these participant interactions looked quite different from traditional digital navigator sessions, subgrantees requested a different means of tracking data for events. As a result, NDIA created an event form in the Digital Navigator Data Platform for digital navigators to track key information such as the number of community members served at these events. Use of this form by subgrantees was optional.

Another lesson learned from the NDNC pilot is that device budgets for digital navigator programs need to include funds for computer accessories to meet community member needs. This includes contrast keyboards, wired and wireless mice, power strips, hotspots, etc.

Creating a Strong Community of Practice is Invaluable

Effective digital navigator programs thrive on an engaged and reliable community of practice, providing a vital space for digital navigators to share experiences, exchange information, troubleshoot challenges, and access resources. While rewarding, the role of a digital navigator can be emotionally demanding, making peer support crucial, especially for those working solo in rural and Tribal communities.

NDIA established distinct communities of practice for each of the NDNC roles: digital navigators, data managers, and program managers. Each role had its own cohort with

dedicated meetings and an online group for support and resources. Additionally, regular meetings and training sessions were held for all subgrantees as part of the larger NDNC cohort.

The digital navigator cohort, in particular, benefited from regular meetings, a dedicated Slack platform, and an online group, which fostered engagement as a single large group. To address the unique needs of sites serving rural and Tribal communities, separate meetings were also arranged for rural and for Tribal subgrantees, allowing them to share information, celebrate successes, and discuss specific issues.

One of the most valuable outcomes of the digital navigator community of practice was the exchange of resources they utilized to better support community members. These resources included accessibility tools for older adults and individuals with disabilities, a device distribution guide, a digital skills BINGO challenge game, and a compendium of digital skilling resources. **All of these are now integrated into the Digital Navigator Program Toolkit, NDIA's national community of practice for digital navigators, and NDIA's resource library.** The insights gained from these communities of practice significantly strengthened the digital navigator model across all geographic areas, including rural, Tribal, urban, and suburban settings. To learn more email digitalnavigators@digitalinclusion.org.

Data collection and evaluation resources

The NDNC program required standardized data collection methods and tools to support digital navigators in managing participant interactions and gathering accurate program data. While NDIA's digital navigator model prior to NDNC included basic data collection form templates, they were too simple to capture all of the necessary information to evaluate the NDNC subgrantees programs and they lacked a system to manage program data. A few subgrantees and some other digital navigator programs had developed their own data management systems, but there was no standardized set of data fields or system being used consistently. As previously described, working with the subgrantees, NDIA developed a Digital Navigator Data Platform, complete with data collection standards and forms, along with a digital navigator program evaluation template. Now that the NDNC grant period is complete, NDIA is working to generalize these data collection and evaluation tools with the intention of publishing them as templates that are freely available to any digital

navigator program. As more programs adopt these templates, it will lead to greater standardization of data and program measurement methods, and facilitate comparison across programs.

Communicating about NDNC, lessons learned, and new digital navigator resources

Outcome 8: Share analysis, findings, and recommendations of the National Digital Navigator Corps through NDIA network of partners and affiliates.

Recommendations and impact stories from the subgrantees

The Digital Navigator Program Toolkit provides a set of concrete tools and advice from digital navigator practitioners across the country, including resources and tools developed by the 18 NDNC sites. To communicate the impact of the subgrantee's digital navigator programs on the participants and communities they served, NDIA created a compendium of 19 National Digital Navigator Corps stories detailing information about each of the subgrantee organizations, characteristics and unique needs of the areas they served, recommendations for implementing a digital navigator program, and stories of impact. Additionally, the updated Digital Inclusion Program Manual included best practices from NDNC sites for addressing barriers to digital inclusion.

Lessons learned from NDNC blog series

NDIA published a series of five blog posts intended to distill key lessons learned and insights from the NDNC program into a digestible format. Each blog post was focused on a particular component of the NDNC program. Posts in the series included:

- Practical Advice and Lessons Learned from the National Digital Navigator Corps (October 3, 2024)
- Five Key Takeaways from Successful Digital Navigator Programs (April 10, 2025)
- Five Lessons on Marketing Your Digital Navigator Program from the National Digital Navigator Corps (August 25, 2025)
- Advancing Digital Equity in Indian Country: A Collaborative Journey (September 3, 2025)

- Five Lessons on Succession and Expansion Planning from the National Digital Navigator Corps (September 8, 2025)

Sharing about NDNC and digital navigators with Indigenous audiences

Taking the lessons learned from implementing digital navigator programs in Tribal communities through NDNC, NDIA and AMERIND gave numerous presentations and conducted trainings about digital inclusion and digital navigators oriented specifically to Indigenous communities and organizations. This information dissemination occurred at 15 Tribal Broadband Bootcamps; a training organized by the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation which highlighted their NDNC digital navigator program; through panels and sessions at national conferences including Net Inclusion, the Congress of American Indians Annual Conference, the National Tribal Telecom Association, the Indigenous Digital Equity and Innovations Summit and AMERIND's Annual Conference; and in monthly Indigenous Digital Inclusion Working Group meetings.

At NDIA's Net Inclusion 2025 in the Gila River Indian Community, there was a general plenary session titled NDNC Impact and Reflections, which presented the lessons learned, key impacts, and program accomplishments of NDNC to more than 800 conference attendees.

Communications about NDNC had broad reach to diverse audiences

Throughout the NDNC program, findings and recommendations were shared across NDIA's community of more than 2,000 affiliates and partner network. Resources include the Digital Navigator Program Toolkit, NDNC impact stories, and blogs were promoted to diverse audiences through the monthly NDIA newsletter with a circulation of 5,234, emails to NDIA's affiliate listserv consisting of 4,429 subscribers, as well as a wide range of presentations, social media channels, and content on the NDIA website.

Key Findings and Recommendations

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 Program 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. Additionally, when designing data collection and reporting requirements for multi-site grant programs, grantors should consider ways to balance standardization across sites with accommodating established systems that grantee organizations may already have in place to reduce reporting burdens.

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.