



**DEFEATING THE
DIGITAL DIVIDE**

HOW CHICAGO CAN ACHIEVE TRUE DIGITAL EQUITY

KIDS FIRST CHICAGO

FALL/WINTER 2022

KIDS FIRST CHICAGO

Kids First Chicago's mission is to dramatically improve education for Chicago's children by ensuring their families are respected authorities and decision-makers in their children's education. We partner with families to help them gain the resources, information, access, and voice they need to achieve their vision for their children. We believe that a healthy education environment where kids, schools, and communities thrive is the key to a world-class city.

We believe that those closest to our students - families, community members, and educators - are best equipped to design policies and systems that will improve equity and lead to stronger outcomes for our students, our communities, and our city.

KEY TERMS & CONCEPTS

Broadband. A “broadband” internet subscription refers to having at least one type of internet subscription other than a dial-up subscription. The American Community Survey (ACS) specifically refers to those who said “Yes” to one or more of the following types of subscriptions: broadband (high speed) such as cable, fiber optic, or Digital Subscriber Line (DSL); cellular data plan for a smartphone or other mobile device; satellite; or some other service other than dial up. More information can be found in this [U.S. Census Bureau report](#).

Note. *Roughly 10% of Chicago households have a device but do not have broadband access. Roughly 1% of Chicago households have broadband access but do not have a device. These households would be considered “disconnected” for the purposes of this report.*

Connected. Kids First Chicago defines “connected” when a household reports having a device **with a** broadband internet connection.

Device. We define a “device” as an internet-enabled device, such as a tablet, or other portable wireless computer.

Disconnected. Households without a device connected to broadband internet connection or lacks a device in the household.

Data Source. U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 and 2020 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates (City-level data accessed via [data.census.gov](#), tract-level data accessed via [nhgis.org](#))

CONTENTS

OPENING LETTER	5
CHICAGO CONNECTED LAUNCH AND IMPACT	6
RECOMMENDATIONS	16
CLOSING STATEMENT	26
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	27

TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

PAGE NUMBER(S)

ACP	AFFORDABLE CONNECTIVITY PROGRAM	5, 7, 17, 18, 19, 20, 26
ACS	AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY	3, 8
BEAD	BROADBAND EQUITY, ACCESS AND DEPLOYMENT	21
CBO	COMMUNITY BASED ORGANIZATIONS	6, 19, 22, 23, 24, 26
CCC	CITY COLLEGES OF CHICAGO	7, 21, 24, 25
CPD	CHICAGO POLICE DEPARTMENT	21
CPD	CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT	20, 21
CPL	CHICAGO PUBLIC LIBRARY	16, 20, 21, 24, 25
CPS	CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS	6, 7, 8, 10, 15, 16, 20, 21, 24, 25, 26
CTA	CHICAGO TRANSIT AUTHORITY	21
DSL	DIGITAL SUBSCRIBER LINE	3, 8
EBB	EMERGENCY BROADBAND BENEFIT	17
FCC	FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION	7, 17, 18, 19, 20
ISP	INTERNET SERVICE PROVIDER	6, 18, 19, 20, 21, 26
K1C	KIDS FIRST CHICAGO	2, 8, 17
NTIA	NATIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION ADMINISTRATION	19
WHO	WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION	15

OPENING LETTER

FALL/WINTER 2022

DEAR FRIENDS & PARTNERS:

Two and a half years ago, our lives were upended by a once-in-a-century pandemic. For some of us, COVID-19 has been a significant inconvenience but, for more than 1.1 million Chicago households, it was a catastrophic disruption to daily life.

CHICAGO CAN CONTINUE TO NOT JUST BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE BUT DEFEAT IT.

In the face of this enormous global disruption, Chicago partners quickly came together to devise a solution.

Chicago Connected proves that we can solve big problems—when we partner and listen to those most impacted.

Chicago Connected is working and it's working at scale. But we can still do more. By focusing on three core areas, Chicago can continue to not just **bridge** the digital divide but **defeat** it.

We invite you to review our progress and dream about what's possible. Together, our great city can lead the nation and inspire others to work toward true digital equity and inclusion.

In partnership,



HAL WOODS
Chief of Policy, Kids First Chicago



DR. JOSÉ D. PACAS
Chief of Data Science & Research, Kids First Chicago

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Connectivity gaps** can be addressed through a concerted effort to sign up eligible families for the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) and by expanding the number of high-speed, low-cost internet offerings available in the city.
- **Device gaps** can be eradicated through a public-private partnership with corporations, government, and local nonprofit organizations to recycle and distribute computers to households in need.
- **Digital skills gaps** can be addressed through expanding and better marketing existing learning opportunities, while workforce needs can be addressed through improved alignment between content providers and employers.

CHICAGO CONNECTED LAUNCH & IMPACT

LAUNCHED IN JUNE 2020, CHICAGO CONNECTED IS A GROUNDBREAKING, MULTIYEAR PROGRAM TO CLOSE CHICAGO'S PRE-KINDERGARTEN-12 (PK-12) DIGITAL DIVIDE FOR 100,000 CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS (CPS) STUDENTS

This unique partnership among CPS, the City of Chicago, internet service providers (ISPs), philanthropists, and dozens of community-based organizations (CBOs) has connected more than 100,000 students – nearly 1 in 3 CPS students – and provided high-quality digital learning content to thousands of families. Chicago Connected has become the national model for closing the digital divide, spurring similar initiatives across the country.

The \$50 million program is the most extensive and longest-term effort by any city to date, offering free high-speed broadband internet to eligible households.

This initiative is a best-in-class example of how parents, policymakers, and partners can come together to solve a long-standing problem.

IMPACT AT A GLANCE

100,000+

CPS STUDENTS IN 60,000+ UNIQUE HOUSEHOLDS CONNECTED TO THE INTERNET IN THE FIRST TWO YEARS OF THE PROGRAM

28,000+

DIGITAL LEARNING HOURS LOGGED BY CHICAGO CONNECTED FAMILIES

20+

CBOs ACROSS THE CITY CONDUCTING PROGRAM OUTREACH IN SCHOOLS AND DELIVERING DIGITAL LEARNING PROGRAMS TO CONNECTED FAMILIES

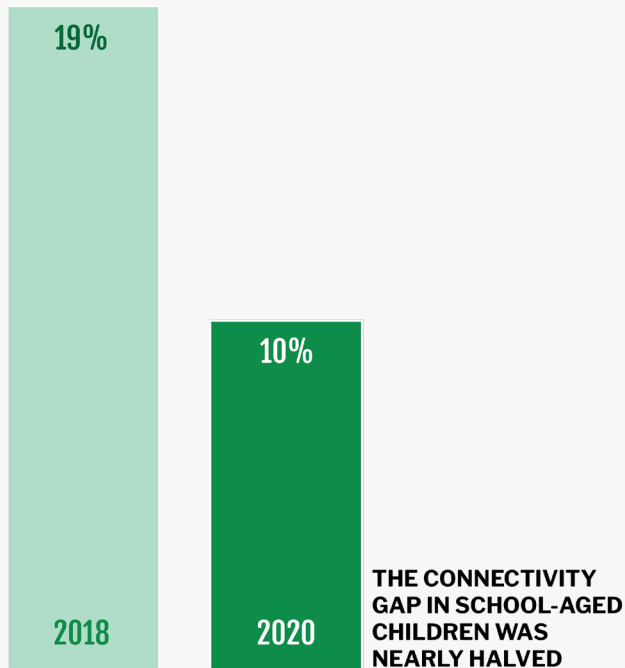
“BEFORE CHICAGO CONNECTED, I DID NOT HAVE THE INTERNET. I RELIED ON MY PHONE AND MY MOM’S INTERNET SERVICE [SHE] LIVED BELOW ME. AND THEN, THE PANDEMIC HIT. BETWEEN WORKING FROM HOME AND SUPPORTING MY 8-YEAR-OLD SON WITH REMOTE LEARNING, QUALITY INTERNET BECAME ESSENTIAL. THANK GOD FOR CHICAGO CONNECTED!”

—
KENDRA TORRES, CPS PARENT, WOODLAWN

RESOURCES & PARTNERSHIPS CREATED BY CHICAGO CONNECTED

- Launched new **Digital Learning Toolkit** in July 2021
- Inspired several other district and city programs (national case studies published by **EducationSuperHighway** and the **Federal Communications Commission [FCC]**) and catalyzed the FCC’s Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)
- Established Guiding Team, a cohort of community and parent leaders tasked with advising on the design of digital learning programming
- Forged partnerships with digital learning platforms **Coursera** and **Northstar**, providing free, best-in-class resources to help families develop digital skills to support academic, career, and life goals
- Expanded to support graduating CPS students attending City Colleges of Chicago

Figure 1. Percentage of Chicago Children (under 18) who are Disconnected, 2018 vs. 2020



Note. The ACS specifically refers to those who said “Yes” to one or more of the following types of subscriptions: broadband (high speed) such as cable, fiber optic, or Digital Subscriber Line (DSL); cellular data plan for a smartphone or other mobile device; satellite; or some other service other than dial up. More information can be found in this U.S. Census Bureau report.

DIGITAL EQUITY IN EDUCATION IN THE CORONAVIRUS ERA SPRING 2020

Kids First Chicago (K1C) and the Metropolitan Planning Council partnered in spring 2020 to call attention to the impact of the digital divide on Chicago families. Our initial report, *Digital Equity in Education in the Coronavirus Era*, revealed the city’s widespread connectivity gaps and proposed several immediate solutions.

The report found that roughly 110,000 children under age 18 were disconnected. In some communities, nearly one-third of households with school-age children were disconnected. These communities were also the hardest hit by food insecurity, unemployment, and housing challenges.

The initial report relied on American Community Survey (ACS) data from 2018. Comparing 2018 ACS data to 2020 ACS data, **K1C finds that the first six months of Chicago Connected helped to effectively halve the connectivity gap for Chicago’s school-age children** – from roughly 110,000 children in 2018 to roughly 55,000 children by the end of 2020.¹

“CHICAGO OFFERS A BLUEPRINT FOR EXPANDING URBAN INTERNET ACCESS”

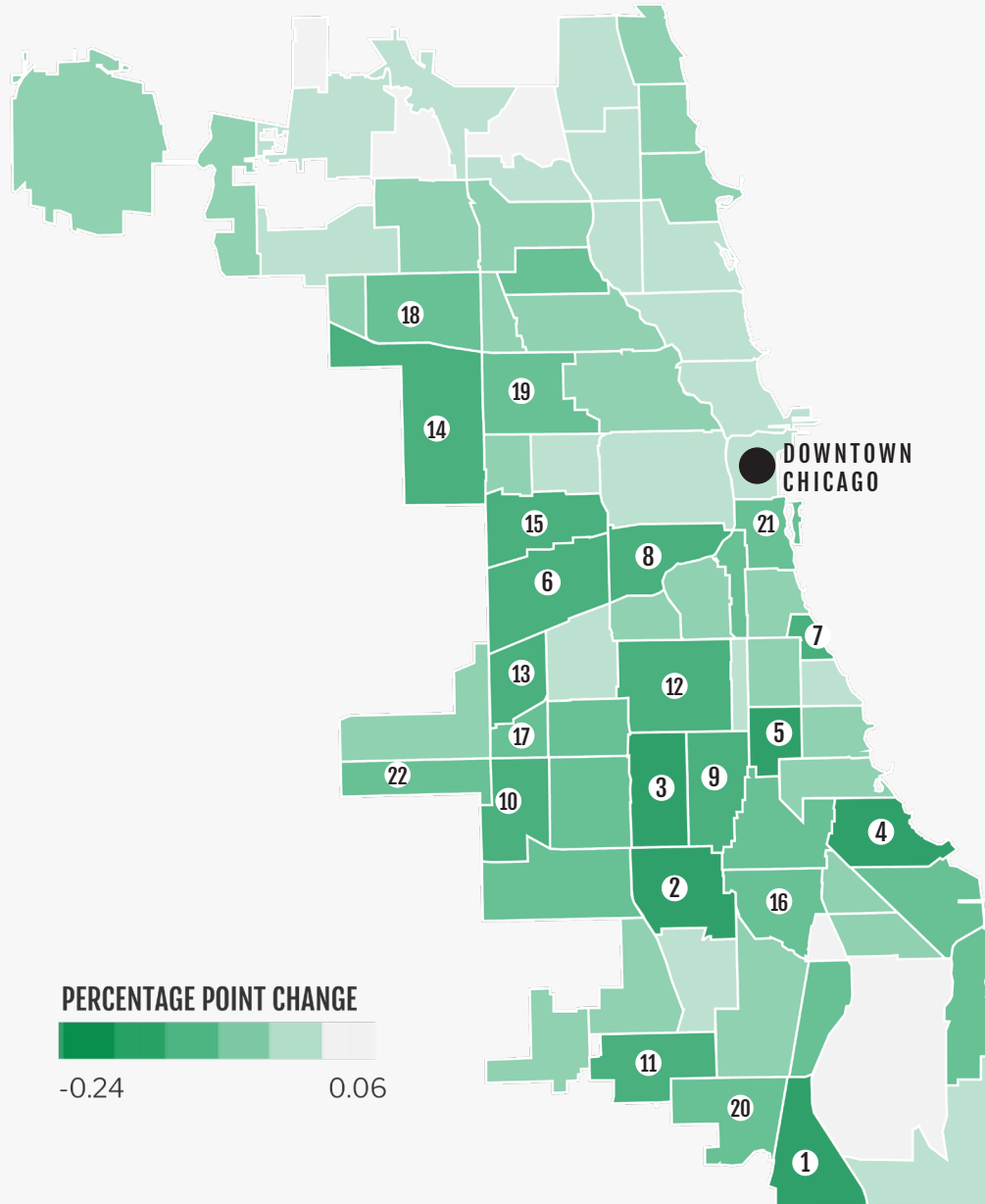
-BLOOMBERG, MAY 2022

While work remains to ensure every Chicago household with a school-age child is connected, the success of the Chicago Connected program – an enduring partnership between the public and private sectors, the civic community, and CBOs – demonstrates that the “Chicago model” can be a viable pathway to closing the digital divide.²

¹ Specifically, we use the 2018 ACS 5-year (2014-2018) and 2020 ACS 5-year (2016-2020) files. 2020 ACS data is captured through the end of December 2020, the same month that CPS expanded the program to include all free-and-reduced-lunch eligible CPS students. Chicago Connected saw a significant increase in program enrollment in early 2021; therefore, the connectivity gap for Chicago’s school-age children has likely closed further. K1C will update our analysis using new ACS 5-year data when available.

² How schools plan to close the pandemic education gap, MIT Technology Review, February 24, 2021

Figure 2. Change in Percentage of Chicago Children (under 18) that are Disconnected, 2018 vs. 2020



20 COMMUNITY AREAS WITH THE LARGEST DECREASES IN DISCONNECTED RATES*

The community areas with the largest decreases in connectivity rates for households with school-age children were the same communities prioritized by Chicago Connected.

1. RIVERDALE
2. AUBURN GRESHAM
3. WEST ENGLEWOOD
4. SOUTH SHORE
5. WASHINGTON PARK
6. SOUTH LAWNSDALE
7. OAKLAND
8. LOWER WEST SIDE
9. ENGLEWOOD
10. WEST LAWN
11. MORGAN PARK
12. NEW CITY (BACK OF THE YARDS)
13. ARCHER HEIGHTS
14. AUSTIN
15. NORTH LAWNSDALE
16. CHATHAM
17. WEST ELSDON
18. BELMONT CRAGIN
19. HUMBOLDT PARK
20. WEST PULLMAN
21. NEAR SOUTH SIDE
22. CLEARING

**Community areas may have the same percentage point change.*

SPURRING A CITYWIDE DIGITAL EQUITY PLAN

In May 2022, nearly two years after the launch of Chicago Connected, Mayor Lightfoot’s administration announced the Digital Equity Council, a cross-sector, community-driven effort to close Chicago’s digital divide. “Born out of Chicago Connected,” the Digital Equity Council seeks to “build upon Chicago Connected’s historic progress in the PK-12 space” to address the barriers to digital equity faced by Chicago residents.³

While Chicago Connected has dramatically increased the number of connected households with school-age children and provided those households with high-quality digital learning resources, Census data show that many Chicagoans remain disconnected.

There are three primary elements of digital inclusion:

1. **Connectivity** – Affordable high-speed internet
2. **Device Ownership** – Internet-enabled desktop or laptop
3. **Training & Support** – Digital learning resources and training

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IS A RACIAL EQUITY ISSUE

Despite the historical progress of Chicago Connected, connectivity gaps for Chicago residents remain stubbornly high in communities that are predominately Black and Latinx/a/o.

While the Chicago Connected initiative halved the number of disconnected Chicago children, (see Figure 1) the number of disconnected adults, by comparison, was only reduced by roughly one-third (see Figure 3).

The disconnected household rate for community areas that are predominantly Black is roughly 30%. In areas that are predominantly Latinx/a/o, the disconnected rate is roughly 20%. However, in predominantly White community areas, the disconnected rate is only about 10%.

Although the percentage of disconnected households in Chicago has dropped from ~25% to roughly ~20%, we still have about 200,000 disconnected households in the city (See figure 4). A lack of connectivity hurts disconnected Chicagoans’ ability to find jobs, develop new skills, access telehealth resources, and more – inhibiting upward economic mobility.

“MY MOTIVATION TO ENROLL IN COURSERA IS HANDS-DOWN MY CHILDREN (I HAVE 7!), AND MY DEAR MOTHER WHO HAS MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS. I COMPLETED TWO COURSES ALREADY: ‘INTRODUCTION TO COMPUTERS AND OFFICE PRODUCTIVITY SOFTWARE’ AND ‘COVID-19 CONTACT TRACING,’ AND I’M CURRENTLY ENROLLED IN ‘PROJECT PLANNING: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER.’”

TACARA N., CPS PARENT OF 7, ROSELAND

³ Mayor Lightfoot Launches Chicago Digital Equity Council, Mayor’s Press Office, May 4, 2022

Figure 3. Percentage of Chicago Adults (over 18) who are Disconnected, 2018 vs. 2020

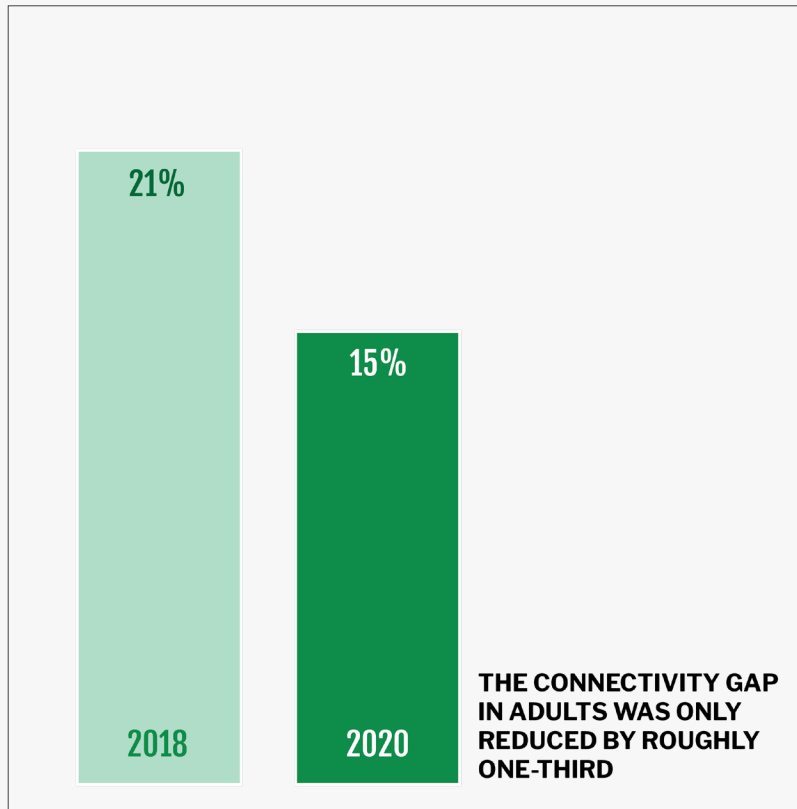
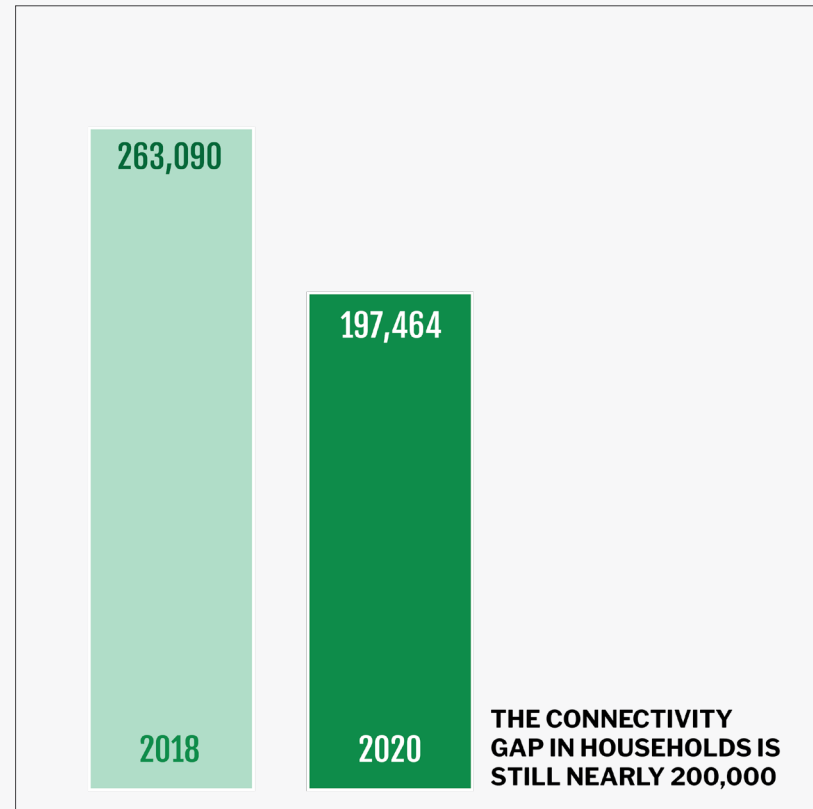


Figure 4. Total # of Disconnected Households, 2018 vs. 2020



DEVICE OWNERSHIP HAS INCREASED, BUT IT HAS BEEN DRIVEN BY THE INCREASED ACQUISITION OF SMARTPHONES – NOT LAPTOP AND DESKTOP COMPUTERS

Since 2018, there has been a substantial increase in the number of Chicago households that own an internet-enabled device. However, a closer look reveals that this increase has been driven largely by increased ownership of internet-enabled smartphones. Through our discussions with Chicago Connected families, we know that a smartphone is insufficient for remote work or school.

NEARLY 1 IN 4 OF ALL HOUSEHOLDS DO NOT OWN A LAPTOP OR DESKTOP

The number of households that own a laptop or desktop computer has changed very little since 2018. As of December 2020, approximately 260,000 households in Chicago – nearly 1 in 4 of all households – do not own a laptop or desktop.

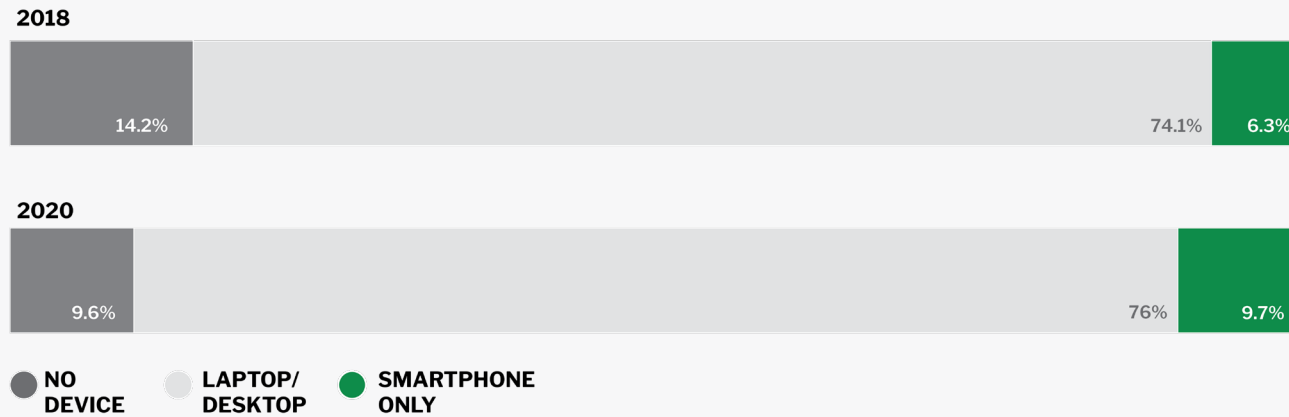
Many more households do not have enough devices for every member of their household, forcing families to make difficult choices about which family members can connect – and when – and which cannot. Much like broadband adoption, it is not that households don't want a computer – they simply cannot afford one.

While some Chicagoans have access to a library or other community anchor institution that provides public access to use computers, it is burdensome to force residents to rely solely on these resources. People need the ability to connect at will, which requires a laptop or desktop computer in each Chicago household.

“IF ALL YOU HAVE IS ACCESS ON YOUR PHONE, YOU’RE UNCONNECTED.”

–
EVAN MARWELL
CEO OF EDUCATIONSUPERHIGHWAY
IN THE 74 MILLION, OCTOBER 2022

Figure 5. Devices in Households by Type of Device, 2018 vs. 2020



DEVICE OWNERSHIP HAS INCREASED, BUT IS MAINLY DRIVEN BY SMARTPHONES, WHICH AREN'T ADEQUATE FOR 21ST-CENTURY LIFE

PARTICIPATING IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY REQUIRES DIGITAL SKILLS

The digital divide is more than just access to devices and the internet – it is also about the ability to navigate an increasingly digital world.

Typically, “digital divide” is used to refer to communities and the people within them who do not have access to computers and therefore have limited access to the internet. But the “digital divide” also refers to the gulf between people who have access to digital skills and those who do not.

Possessing digital skills includes both being comfortable using current technology and having the capacity to adapt to new technologies. It also includes being able to participate in job-specific skill development to advance in the workforce, as well as the ability to adapt to advances and changes in the labor market.⁴

In short, you may own a computer and you may be connected to the internet, but if you don’t have the necessary skills to navigate these tools and devices, there is a world opportunity closed to you.

Our **Year 1 Chicago Connected survey** indicated that roughly 2 in 5 respondents were interested in developing digital skills to help them find a new job in the next five years.

Structural racism contributes to the digital divide. Occupational segregation and lack of access to digital skill-building opportunities impact people of color disproportionately. Yet these are the people who are concentrated in jobs that are more likely to be affected by rapid technological change.

The pandemic demonstrated the urgency of connecting all Chicagoans. It also revealed that we will not close Chicago’s digital divide and realize our city’s economic potential until we empower all Chicagoans to adapt to a constantly evolving workplace.

⁴ The “digital divide” is about access to devices and the internet – but it’s also about access to skills, National Skills Coalition, September 15, 2021

THE VALUE OF DIGITAL SKILLS IN OUR COMMUNITIES

Digital skills are associated with a variety of important benefits beyond employment, including improved financial literacy, improved access to support services, enhanced health and well-being, and the increased ability to engage socially. Without these skills, individuals can be at a significant disadvantage.

For example, a **recent study** has confirmed that low digital health literacy – defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as the ability to seek, assess, and make use of health information via electronic media – contributes to lower health outcomes and perpetuates health inequities.

Our Year 1 Chicago Connected survey indicated that about 2 in 3 Chicago households were interested in technology training.

Technology has changed how we get and share information, communicate with others, and understand the world – making access to digital learning paramount to full participation in our society.

“I REMEMBER LAST YEAR TRYING TO SUPPORT MY PRE-K GRANDSON WITH HIS REMOTE LEARNING. AT THAT POINT, I COULD NOT EVEN FIGURE OUT HOW TO SUBMIT ASSIGNMENTS TO HIS TEACHER ONLINE! AT AGE 57, I DECIDED I NEEDED TO ROLL UP MY SLEEVES AND LEARN HOW TO USE THIS THING CALLED A COMPUTER. IN THIS DAY AND AGE, EVERYTHING IS ONLINE. THROUGH FREE NORTHSTAR WORKSHOPS WITH HOPE TEC, I AM PROUD TO SAY I’VE LEARNED THE BASICS AND EVEN EARNED TWO CERTIFICATES FOR MY RESUME. I AM NOW BETTER ABLE TO SUPPORT MY GRANDKIDS, AND WILL SOON START TO PURSUE AN ONLINE JOB WITH MY NEW SKILLS.”

—
JACQUELINE SLAUGHTER, CPS GRANDPARENT OF 6, ENGLEWOOD

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

TO BRING DIGITAL EQUITY TO ALL CHICAGOANS

Our recommendations for addressing the three prongs of digital inequity – connectivity, device ownership, and access to training – will require a community-led “all hands on deck” approach.

Each recommendation will require commitment from the public sector – including the city of Chicago, the state of Illinois, and/or the federal government – as well as our city’s private sector and broader civic community. Community anchor institutions – both government institutions like CPS and Chicago Public Library (CPL) – as well as community-based nonprofits, will play a critical role.

Through planning, execution, sustained funding, and an abiding commitment to maintain momentum and realize this historic opportunity, the city of Chicago can become the first large urban city to eradicate the digital divide, unleashing the potential of all residents to thrive regardless of ZIP code.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Connect All Chicagoans to Free or Low-cost High-speed Internet
2. Close Chicago’s Device Gap
3. Offer Free and Low-cost Digital Learning Resources That Meet Chicagoans’ Needs.

“IN 2020, WE RECOGNIZED THAT ACCESS TO THE INTERNET WAS INDISPENSABLE TO KEEP FAMILIES CONNECTED. NOW, WE NEED TO RECOGNIZE THAT DIGITAL INCLUSION ENCOMPASSES NOT JUST HAVING AN INTERNET CONNECTION BUT ALSO THE EQUIPMENT AND THE KNOWLEDGE TO EFFECTIVELY NAVIGATE IN AN INCREASINGLY DIGITAL SOCIETY.”

**CLAIBORNE WADE
PARENT LIAISON AT FAMILY FOCUS & CHICAGO
DIGITAL EQUITY COUNCIL MEMBER**

1 CONNECT ALL CHICAGOANS TO FREE OR LOW-COST HIGH-SPEED INTERNET.

INTERNET ACCESS IS NOW AS ESSENTIAL AS WATER AND ELECTRICITY. ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE, RELIABLE, HIGH-SPEED BROADBAND IS NECESSARY TO FULLY PARTICIPATE IN MODERN LIFE.

In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic and inspired by the FCC's [case study](#) on Chicago Connected, the United States Congress appropriated \$3.2 billion to the FCC in late 2020 to help low-income households pay for broadband service. By late 2021, the EBB Program became the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), a new, long-term \$14 billion initiative that provides a discount of up to \$30 per month toward internet service for eligible households.

This historic investment in providing qualifying Americans with the resources to adopt high-speed internet is laudatory. Yet, program awareness is a serious issue in many cities across America, including Chicago. A [recent survey](#) K1C disseminated to Chicago Connected families – nearly all of whom are eligible for the ACP – revealed that fewer than half of all respondents were aware of this federal internet subsidy program. Moreover, a June 2022 [analysis](#) by the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society indicated that less than one-third of all eligible Chicago households participated in the ACP.

Funding exists and the ACP's framework incorporates community anchor institutions into its overall policy design, but delays in launching comprehensive outreach efforts risk ensuring that all eligible households access this opportunity. Through our work on Chicago Connected, K1C has seen how critical it is for households afflicted by the digital divide to have trusted community partners help them navigate the sign-up process.

FOR THE ACP TO REACH ITS FULL POTENTIAL, THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, AS WELL AS STATES AND CITIES, NEED TO ACCELERATE EFFORTS TO ENGAGE COMMUNITY ANCHOR INSTITUTIONS TO SIGN UP ELIGIBLE FAMILIES. SPECIFICALLY:

The FCC must ensure its Affordable Connectivity Program Outreach Grant Program addresses the root causes behind low ACP adoption rates. The Outreach Grant Program, which will be available to cities, counties, states, as well as nongovernment entities like CBOs, includes a total of \$100 million to be allocated over five years. The Outreach Grant Program is intended to assist outreach efforts, ranging from in-person events and literature campaigns to digital campaigns and paid media promoting enrollment in the ACP.⁵

**THE ISSUE IS THAT THE CURRENT
TIMELINE INDICATES THAT THE STATE
OF ILLINOIS WILL NOT BE ABLE TO
CREATE AN APPLICATION PROCESS
FOR THESE MUCH-NEEDED FUNDS
UNTIL 2024**

The FCC has made progress, and it does appear poised to launch the Outreach Grant Program application prior to the end of 2022, but there is no information as to when applicant organizations could expect to receive funding, no sense of minimum funding amounts, and no concrete technical support and assistance materials that organizations will need to train staff to address the key factors inhibiting ACP adoption.

KEY FACTORS

- **Low Program Awareness**
- **A Lack of Clarity About the Offerings and Processes**
- **A Lack of Trust in the Available Services**
- **Structural Limitations**

In Year 1 of Chicago Connected, the program's 35 CBOs served as critical navigators for eligible families, helping to raise awareness about the program, answer questions about the sign-up process, share details about the program's robust consumer protections, and help serve as an advocate if any service issues arose between families and ISPs. As the success of Chicago Connected demonstrated, community organizations are poised and able to address each barrier to adoption through direct engagement with households eligible for the ACP. But community organizations who will be responsible for hiring and training staff to support outreach efforts need more budgetary certainty around timing and potential allocation amounts, as well as materials and resources to effectively train staff on leading community conversations to address the root causes behind low ACP adoption rates.

⁵ [Funding for ACP Outreach Is Almost Here, National Digital Inclusion Alliance, August 17, 2022](#)

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) must expedite the release of Digital Equity Act funds to states like Illinois. The Digital Equity Act provides \$2.75 billion in planning and implementation grants to advance digital equity. The Act aims to ensure that all communities can access and use affordable, reliable high-speed internet to meet their needs and improve their lives.⁶ Cities like Chicago and CBOs will be eligible to apply directly to the state of Illinois for digital equity projects, including outreach efforts. *The issue is that the current timeline indicates that the state of Illinois will not be able to create an application process for these much-needed funds until 2024.* Critical projects that could be funded through the Digital Equity Act will not come close to realizing their full potential unless efforts are made to expedite the release of these much-needed funds.

While community anchor institutions wait for these federal funds, the city of Chicago could devote a portion of the \$28M in FY23 funding it plans to spend on digital equity efforts to support community organizations who are working to connect households to the internet, free/low-cost devices, and digital learning resources.

Moreover, the FCC and its affiliates should do more to accelerate the involvement of community anchor institutions not only to boost enrollment in the ACP, but also to ensure participating ISPs are adhering to the ACP's consumer protection provisions. While the FCC has strong consumer protections for the ACP consumer protections – among them lifting the requirement for credit checks, imposing strict restrictions on upselling, eliminating past debt as a barrier to enrolling in ACP, and providing ACP-enrolled households with a complaint-filing mechanism – the reality is that the federal government has very little proximity to the issues households may experience through interacting with an ISP during or after the sign-up process.

CBOs can educate households on the rights afforded to them under the ACP and can escalate local issues far more effectively and efficiently to the appropriate stakeholders. Chicago Connected's CBOs play this role exceptionally well, providing the program management team with on-the-ground intel to nimbly respond to any customer issues and making ISPs more accountable to participating families.

Finally, as members of our city's civic community, ISPs have a responsibility to partner with local CBOs to help connect Chicago's unconnected families, while also promoting the federal subsidy to existing customers who could benefit. ISPs should be ready to commit some of their own resources to ensure CBOs have the capacity to not only support households signing up for ACP but also access free or low-cost devices and digital learning resources.

ISPs must be active partners in promoting and supporting local digital equity efforts, and not rely on passive outreach efforts to build their customer base. By taking a proactive approach, ISPs will benefit reputationally as they deepen their relationships with communities.

This could be done through stipends or other investments in the CBOs. Some local partnerships have been launched, but more could be done to engage CBOs on outreach efforts today.⁷

⁶ Internet For All Info Sheet, NTIA, May 2022

⁷ Comcast to invest \$500K at Chicago YMCAs to create tech hubs as part of digital equity project, Chicago Sun-Times, July 20, 2022

WE NEED MORE HIGH-SPEED INTERNET OPTIONS TO ENSURE THAT EVERY CHICAGOAN HAS FREE OR LOW-COST ACCESS. SPECIFICALLY, THE CITY OF CHICAGO SHOULD:

Even with the ACP, we know that cost remains one of the primary reasons why Chicagoans have no broadband at home. Other barriers are service quality and, in some of Chicago's most underserved communities, a lack of broadband infrastructure. "Digital redlining" occurs when ISPs do not make infrastructure investments in certain communities due to the misguided belief that local residents lack the capacity to pay for high-speed internet. To ensure every Chicagoan has access to affordable high-speed internet, Chicago families need more broadband options. As the FCC's National Broadband Plan notes, competition provides consumers the benefits of choice, better service, and lower prices.⁸

Partner with electric utilities to expand broadband access. Electricity distributors could play a critical role in bringing broadband services to underserved areas of Chicago by allowing ISPs to use their existing infrastructure to provide a network for making high-speed internet connections. In Chicago, Commonwealth Edison (ComEd) has fiber optic cables throughout the city and continues to upgrade its fiber infrastructure through smart-grid modernization efforts. Although utility companies in Illinois are restricted by state law from serving as ISPs, ComEd is not restricted from partnering with local ISPs to provide communities with additional connectivity options. As an additional benefit to Chicago energy consumers, any revenue ComEd would generate from leasing its fiber would require a corresponding reduction in energy costs for Chicago consumers because ComEd, as a regulated utility company, is capped in terms of how much revenue it can generate.

Pilot public-private partnerships that promote connectivity options in areas of the city with the lowest broadband adoption rates.

CPS has a fiber network that could be leveraged in partnership with ISPs to provide new connectivity options to communities. The city of Chicago, too, has infrastructure that could be leveraged, including assets such as buildings, conduit, and fiber. Promising pilots out of **Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Brooklyn, and Cleveland** offer examples of how local nonprofits could partner with CPS, CPL, and/or the Chicago Park District to connect households to free internet. The city of Chicago has allocated \$28 million in funding to promote local connectivity options; leveraging city and sister agency assets, as well as exploring mesh networks, should be discussed as the city considers its options.

Finally, advocates for expanded broadband options in Chicago must encourage Springfield legislators to support a once-in-a-generation opportunity to increase the number of internet providers in our city. In spring 2022, with zero public input, the Illinois State Senate considered a bill that would have effectively blocked Chicago families from benefiting from this historic opportunity to expand connectivity options and narrow the city's connectivity gap. Specifically, the bill's restrictions would have kept millions of dollars in broadband investment out of Chicago by preventing new or existing providers from using federal Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program funds to offer Chicagoans new, more affordable high-speed internet options. The bill did not pass but given a status quo that has left hundreds of thousands of Chicagoans unconnected and excluded from 21st century life, any effort to restrict the usage of these federal broadband infrastructure funds should be heavily scrutinized.

⁸ National Broadband Plan, FCC, March 17, 2010

2 CLOSE CHICAGO'S DEVICE GAP.

THERE ARE ALREADY ENOUGH DEVICES IN CHICAGO TODAY TO ENSURE EVERY HOUSEHOLD CAN OWN ONE. LET'S REFURBISH AND DISTRIBUTE THEM.

Chicago has the hardware, technical and operational expertise, and the capacity to fully eliminate the city's 260,000 device gap over the next three years.

With 10 Fortune 500 companies headquartered in the city and more than 165,000 tech workers,⁹ Chicago's corporate sector has an ample supply of laptops and desktops. Chicago's public sector, too, possesses hundreds of thousands of laptops and desktops, with more than 200,000 at CPS locations and thousands more owned by the city of Chicago, the City Colleges of Chicago (CCC), Chicago Public Library (CPL), the Chicago Park District (CPD), the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), and the Chicago Police Department (CPD).

The lifespan of a computer in a corporate environment is typically around three years, whereupon the device is usually sent to a landfill or shelved. The public sector typically holds on to devices for longer periods of time, but with government becoming increasingly aware¹⁰ of the productivity costs associated with utilizing aging computer hardware, efforts to modernize have accelerated.

Chicago is also home to two of the country's most successful computer refurbishment nonprofits: **Compudopt** and **PCs for People**. These organizations rely on device and monetary donations to cover the cost of refurbishments. Both have successful track records in helping to bridge the device gap in the cities in which they operate.

⁹ Chicago lost the most tech jobs during pandemic, *Crain's Chicago Business*, July 14, 2022

¹⁰ This is the oldest tech still used by the U.S. government, *Business Insider*, May 26, 2016

TO ENSURE EVERY CHICAGO HOUSEHOLD HAS A FREE OR LOW-COST COMPUTER OR LAPTOP, THE CITY OF CHICAGO SHOULD CONSIDER:

Launching a three-year “Chicago Challenge,” a competition between the city’s public and private sectors to partner with local hardware refurbishment companies and CBOs to distribute devices to households that need them. Through a public-private pact, Chicago could be poised to donate and distribute more than 260,000 devices in the next three years. Corporations and government agencies would each be challenged to donate 130,000 laptops and desktops to the city’s two refurbishment partners over a three-year period. Companies could also provide funding to allow these partners to purchase new devices. At the same time, private individuals, foundations, and other entities could participate by donating devices directly to Compudopt and PCs for People.

A “Chicago Challenge” would create a device recycling pipeline between public-private partners and local device refurbishing nonprofits. To assist with the distribution, the city could leverage a blend of Digital Equity Act funds, local revenue, and philanthropic dollars to engage trusted community partners in areas with the largest device ownership gaps in efforts to reach specific households in need. These community partners could then refer households directly to the refurbishment entities for donated computers.

Sustained for a three-year period, this effort has the potential to ensure every Chicago household that currently does not own a computer could be served. Moreover, this would establish an ongoing pipeline of refurbished devices to families who need them.

3 OFFER FREE AND LOW-COST DIGITAL LEARNING RESOURCES THAT MEET CHICAGOANS' NEEDS.

FOR NON DIGITAL NATIVES, NON-ENGLISH SPEAKERS, AND OTHER POPULATIONS, NAVIGATING THE INTERNET CAN BE A BARRIER. LET'S REMOVE THIS OBSTACLE BY LEVERAGING EXISTING RESOURCES AND PROCURING NEW TOOLS TAILORED TO ADDRESSING EVERY CHICAGOAN'S UNIQUE LEARNING NEEDS.

Chicago has an abundance of free and low-cost digital learning resources. In fall 2020, the Chicago Connected program launched its Guiding Team composed of parents, community organizations, government agencies, and digital learning experts to curate best-in-class digital resources tailored to the needs of Chicago Connected families.

Since then, 2 in 3 Chicago Connected participants have expressed interest in technology training. The Guiding Team implemented a three-pronged approach to serving families' digital literacy needs: self-paced resources, live trainings from local CBOs, and access to citywide, one-on-one tech support.

“I’VE ALWAYS WANTED TO BE AN ACCOUNTANT, BUT DUE TO DIFFICULT ENTRY EXAMS, TOO MUCH PAPERWORK AND HIGH COSTS, TRADITIONAL COLLEGE HAS BEEN OUT OF REACH FOR ME. WHEN I LEARNED COURSERA OFFERED ACCOUNTING COURSES ONLINE FOR FREE, I WAS ECSTATIC! I AM NOW TAKING A COLLEGE-ACCREDITED INTRODUCTION TO ACCOUNTING COURSE, WHICH WILL NOT ONLY HELP ME REALIZE MY HOPE FOR BECOMING AN ACCOUNTING CLERK, BUT ALSO WITH MY PERSONAL FINANCES FOR BECOMING A FIRST-TIME HOME BUYER.”

**—
KEILA SANTIAGO, PARENT OF 3 CPS STUDENTS
HUMBOLDT PARK**

The program now offers families a variety of resources through the Chicago Connected Digital Learning tool kit, including access to Northstar, Coursera, and a bilingual help desk sponsored and operated by the YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago, as well as workshops and individual coaching and mentoring sessions offered by community partners. All these resources are free to families and are available on CPS’s website. Since July 2021, more than 28,000 learning hours have been logged across these platforms. YMCA’s bilingual help desk reported more than 900 support hours over the year as well. Families overwhelmingly approved of the digital learning offerings: 1 in 4 respondents to the Year 2 survey availed themselves of one or more digital learning programs as part of Chicago Connected and roughly 4 out of 5 indicated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the digital learning offerings.

Chicago Public Library (CPL) also provides patrons with a variety of free digital learning resources. Chicago students even have access to live one-on-one homework help online every day. Additionally, in July 2021, the Chicago Community Colleges (CCC) launched the Future Ready program, offering more than 60 high-demand, short-term programs at no cost to qualifying Chicagoans. Paired with CCC’s Fresh Start student debt relief and forgiveness program, both new and returning CCC students, including those who are undocumented, can participate in Future Ready.

TO ENSURE EVERY CHICAGO HOUSEHOLD HAS ACCESS TO THE RICH OFFERINGS IN CHICAGO'S DIGITAL LEARNING ECOSYSTEM, THE CITY OF CHICAGO AND ITS PARTNERS SHOULD:

Better market existing free digital learning offerings that build basic technology skills and establish a one-stop shop for these resources.

The Chicago Connected digital learning resources, including community-level technical support and skills-building programming, as well as content offered by CPL, are free, bilingual, and high quality. The city of Chicago should make these offerings available to all Chicagoans, not just CPS families, and engage in a citywide marketing campaign to build greater awareness of their existence. The city, in partnership with participating Chicago community partners, should apply for Digital Equity Act funds to sustain staffing and support beyond the end of the Chicago Connected program in June 2024. Community organizations are essential to this program given that they can both serve as navigators to help advise residents on self-paced resources, as well as provide content directly. All partners should commit to continuous improvement through the administration of annual surveys to Chicagoans to gauge perceptions of content offerings and potentially procure new content that evolves with the needs of Chicago households. Finally, the city should establish a single government body – i.e., CPL – as the entity that serves as a central repository for all digital learning content.

Create a certificate-to-employment pipeline with content providers and corporate partners to offer professional-level certifications with direct access to jobs in high-growth industries.

The city of Chicago could partner with World Business Chicago, Skills for Chicagoland's Future, Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership, other workforce development partners and certificate-creating content providers, such as CCC and vendors such as Coursera, to create and align professional-level certifications with readily available job opportunities in high-growth industries. Chicago residents who complete these certification programs should have priority access to jobs that require the knowledge gained through these programs. Following the Chicago Connected model, job coaches through the American Job Center could help Chicago residents navigate the various industries and job opportunities available.

Make higher education completion more attainable and affordable by offering credit-bearing virtual learning opportunities through CCC, Coursera, and other providers.

Many skills-building digital learning opportunities, even those that generate professional-level certifications, do not offer programs that count toward college credit. In the wake of the pandemic, countless Chicago adults are looking to develop the new skills needed to participate in the local economy. By making all course offerings eligible for college credit, there is a higher likelihood that Chicago adults will enroll in higher-education institutions across the Chicagoland area, given that completing either a two- or four-year college degree will be more attainable and affordable.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

CHICAGO POSSESSES THE RESOURCES, TALENT, AND EXPERTISE TO ACHIEVE DIGITAL EQUITY FOR ALL RESIDENTS. WHAT WE NEED IS THE WILL AND COMMITMENT OF OUR CITY'S PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR LEADERS TO REALIZE THIS HISTORIC OPPORTUNITY.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Connectivity gaps** can be addressed through a concerted effort to sign up eligible families for the ACP and by expanding the number of high-speed, low-cost internet offerings available in the city.
- **Device gaps** can be eradicated through a public-private partnership with corporations, government, and local nonprofit organizations to recycle and distribute computers to households in need.
- **Digital skills gaps** can be addressed through expanding and better marketing existing learning opportunities, while workforce needs can be addressed through improved alignment between content providers and employers.

The COVID-19 pandemic was the catalyst that compelled the city, CPS, community organizations, philanthropists, and ISPs to launch Chicago Connected, the largest internet service program for PK-12 students in the country.

The pandemic further prompted the federal government, the state of Illinois, and the city of Chicago to make historic investments in the three critical areas needed to achieve digital equity: connectivity, devices, and access to digital learning resources. Through the adoption of the recommendations outlined in this report and others gleaned from community conversations led by the city's Digital Equity Council, the city of Chicago has the potential to be the first large U.S. city to sustainably close the digital divide.

The pandemic shone a spotlight on Chicago's – and the nation's – longstanding digital inequities and made it apparent that everyone must have access to the digital world in order to thrive in today's society. It is now incumbent upon us to carry through the early promise of Chicago Connected and ensure that all Chicagoans have the opportunity to emerge from the pandemic stronger and more skilled. Let the "Chicago model" continue to be a nationwide exemplar of true digital equity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

KIDS FIRST CHICAGO IS PROUD TO BE PART OF A COMMITTED COALITION OF PARTNERS WHO ARE WORKING TO ERADICATE CHICAGO'S DIGITAL DIVIDE. WE GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGE OUR LEADING DONORS WHO MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR US TO LEAD PARENT- AND DATA-INFORMED INITIATIVES LIKE CHICAGO CONNECTED, AND OUR MANY PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PARTNERS WHO HAVE GENEROUSLY CONTRIBUTED TO THIS GROUNDBREAKING INITIATIVE.

CHICAGO CONNECTED PROGRAM PARTNERS



THE CHICAGO COMMUNITY TRUST
AND AFFILIATES
EQUITY • OPPORTUNITY • PROSPERITY



KIDS FIRST CHICAGO DIGITAL EQUITY FUNDERS





THANK YOU



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