

TPRC 2021

# **Creating a Digital Bridge: Lessons and policy implications from a technology access and distribution program for low-income job seekers**

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# Collaborators

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A woman with long dark hair and glasses is shown in profile, working on a laptop. She is in a home office setting with a desk, a speaker, and a window in the background. The lighting is soft, coming from the window.

# Digital Bridge Program

Distributed **197** refurbished laptops and **174** internet hotspots to low-income job seekers in 2020

# Research goals

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- > To understand participants' existing technology skills, sources of technology support, and what assistance they need to use their new technology
- > To understand what resources organizations need to support participants with their technology

# Study design

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## SJI

- > Demographic surveys (n=180)
- > Participant Northstar Digital Literacy Assessments (n=49)

## UW

- > Participant (n=15) audio diaries & interviews
- > Case manager (n=4) audio diaries & focus group

# Participant demographics reflect pandemic job loss inequities

SORRY  
WE ARE  
CLOSED

COVID-19

- > Average participant was 37 years old (range 18 - 64), female (61%), Black or African American (73%), and an immigrant, refugee, or asylee (54%)
- > 34% were homeless (RV, street, emergency shelter, couchsurfing)

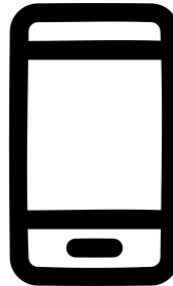


## Participant technology access

- > Majority only had one device - smartphone (79%) and 7% had no device at all.
- > 42% had no access to Internet at all prior to Digital Bridge

# Digital skill ability reflects lack of access

- > Able to web search, use certain apps (YouTube, Maps, basic email) to meet basic needs
- > But lack foundational computer skills (less 25% Northstar passing rates)





# Resources provided by the program were **NOT** used

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- > Refurbisher technical support line
- > Pre-loaded resources
- > Self-paced online digital literacy lessons



**Case managers  
added tech  
support on top  
of their other  
job duties**



A young Black woman with short dark hair is shown in profile, smiling warmly as she looks at her smartphone. She is wearing a dark green ribbed sweater and a thin necklace with a small cross pendant. The background is a bright, slightly blurred indoor setting with a window. A white rounded rectangular box is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing text.

**Family,  
friends, and  
social  
networks  
were used**

# Participant support needs

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*Yes, if a virtual computer class was available, I would most definitely take it...[M]ore tech help would be great...help is really necessary. - Trina, interview*

# Tech attributes & participant/ program needs



- > Some refurbished computers had some battery issues
- > Text heavy PCs were challenging for English language learners

# Hotspot affordances fit SJ and participant needs

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But some never got a decent signal at  
their home



# Policy implications

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- > Federal and local funding needs to support program overhead AND participant support needs AND devices AND access
- > And of course, more funding for digital equity research!

# Thank you

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Program funding:

- > City of Seattle
- > Comcast

UW research funding:

- > UW Population Health Fund

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