



Digital Navigators of the Hudson Valley:

Report Highlights and
Recommendations

By Colin Rhinesmith, Ph.D.

Statement of Problem

New Yorkers continue to face significant challenges gaining access to affordable and reliable high-speed internet, digital devices, and digital skills. The [New York State Digital Equity Plan](#)¹ found that “nearly one million New York households—13% of all households—lack access to broadband internet of any type.” Those with limited monthly incomes, including older adults, people with disabilities, and individuals with language barriers are significantly less likely to have broadband internet service. These are some of the many digital equity challenges highlighted in the 2023 New York State Internet Access Survey, which resulted in 5,781 responses.

The State Digital Equity Plan also reported that 9% of all New Yorkers did not have access to the internet-enabled devices they needed at home and 13% of New Yorkers found it “difficult to navigate the internet to meet their needs.” Only half of all survey respondents reported feeling “completely confident” in their ability to learn online, find online medical information, and apply for jobs. (p. 94). One issue facing 87% of New Yorkers, regardless of background, is the inability to feel safe online (p. 57). In the Mid-Hudson region alone, 89% of residents reported being concerned or very concerned about their digital safety. These findings represent enormous challenges to addressing digital equity in New York, including in the Southeastern region.

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¹ https://broadband.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/06/final_new-york-state-digital-equity-plan-accessible.pdf

Digital Navigators of the Hudson Valley

One solution is the [Digital Navigators of the Hudson Valley \(DNHV\)](https://hvconnected.org/)² initiative. The Southeastern NY Library Resources Council launched the program in 2022 in collaboration with partners at the Mid-Hudson Library System, Ramapo Catskill Library System, and Westchester Library System. The DNHV program has since trained over 130 individuals at 84 public libraries and non-profit organizations to become Digital Navigators. DNHV defines “Digital Navigators” as “trained, trusted guides who help deal with a variety of technology needs. Navigators work in libraries and other community organizations. They assist anyone in need with using a device, securing free or low-cost internet service, and much more.”

Between 2022–2024, eight cohorts of applicants from libraries and other community-based organizations were trained to become Digital Navigators. The program requires that Navigators should either be employed by a local institution or have an established volunteer role with one. The initial cohort included 80 individuals and each subsequent cohort consisted of 12–30 new and returning navigators. The cohorts were trained to help New Yorkers locate affordable home internet, devices, and digital skills training. They also learned how to complete client intake forms, utilize marketing materials, leverage communication tools to connect with other Digital Navigators, and practice client interactions through role-playing. Once the training was complete, Digital Navigators were ready to begin work in public libraries and non-profit organizations across their regions. This work included supporting New Yorkers and their digital equity needs through repeated interactions with community members to address technology issues, including home connectivity, devices, and digital skills.

Digital Navigators are trained, trusted guides who help deal with a variety of technology needs.



² <https://hvconnected.org/>

Program Impact

L&G Research and Evaluation Consulting, working in partnership with the Digital Equity Research Center at the Metropolitan New York Library Council, analyzed data gathered by the Southeastern NY Library Council about the Digital Navigator program between 2022–2024. The research team found many benefits for public libraries, underscoring the necessity of these services for libraries and other community-based organizations in their regions. Because nationwide indicators for measuring the outcomes and impacts of Digital Navigator programs do not currently exist, we believe the findings in this report will help to inform efforts to develop indicators in the future. Some of the key findings from the analysis are highlighted below:

The research team found many benefits for public libraries, underscoring the necessity of these services for libraries and other community-based organizations.



Benefits to community members

Individual community members received direct benefits from Digital Navigators. Some of these benefits are highlighted in the following findings:



Over 2,800 digital support interactions were provided between 2022–2024.

This includes 980+ clients, predominantly English speaking and residing in urban areas across all counties of the Hudson Valley.



Digital Navigators achieved high “issue resolution” (2022–2023) and “client satisfaction” (2024) rates.

- 90%+ issue resolution rate in 2022–2023.
- 76% of clients were “completely satisfied” in 2024.



“Digital skills” was the primary reason for visits to Digital Navigators between 2022–2024.

- In 2022, 86% of issues were attributed to a lack of digital skills.
- In 2023, 90% of issues were attributed to a lack of digital skills.
- Most common requests included email setup, online forms, and using apps.



Individuals received hands-on, device-based support during these interactions.

- Most sessions lasted over 30 minutes.
- Tech support was provided across a variety of devices— especially laptops/desktops and smartphones.

Benefits for libraries and non-profits

Public libraries and non-profit organizations also received direct benefits from having Digital Navigators. Some of these benefits are highlighted in the following findings:



In 2024, 91% of Digital Navigators indicated that they will continue working as a Digital Navigator at their organization and keep their name and organization listed on the hvconnected.org webpage.



In 2024, 70% of Digital Navigators “strongly agreed” with the statement that applying what they learned will help improve library services to the public.



In 2024, 67% of Digital Navigators indicated that they intended to apply what they learned through their participation in the program.

Digital Navigators gained new skills in the following areas:



Deep knowledge of the Affordable Connectivity Program, Lifeline, and internet provider tools



Tech troubleshooting and outreach strategies



Communication, patience, and user-centered problem solving



Use of formal assessments and digital privacy awareness

Digital Navigators made connections to other organizations through their participation in the program.



The most frequently mentioned connection types included: senior centers; libraries; faith organizations; schools; and healthcare services.



Collaborations to host tech events, drop-in help, or monthly clinics.

Because the majority of Digital Navigators were already employed as staff members at a public library or other non-profit organization, there were many direct benefits to the “host” organizations as well. These benefits include: increased confidence in helping people with technology needs; increased awareness among staff about digital equity issues in the community; gained knowledge of affordable internet service options for patrons; increased digital literacy skills among library staff; increased communication skills and deeper awareness of library services and digital resources.

Benefits of the program include increased confidence in helping people with technology needs.



The experiences of Digital Navigators: In their own words

The majority of Digital Navigators had an overwhelmingly positive experience, believed the program was personally and/or professionally rewarding, and joined calls to expand or continue the program. Some of these experiences are highlighted in the following quotes from Digital Navigators reported in data collected through exit surveys and client interaction forms:

“I didn’t realize the potential that exists with the Digital Navigators program. It opens up a door to community members that we may not otherwise encounter. It is extremely important to build bridges to ALL people and Digital Navigators is a great vehicle to do that.”

“It gave me more confidence to help people with tech concerns, and I feel like I really was able to make a positive impact.”

“I knew little about the Affordable Connectivity Program and related assistance programs and now I feel comfortable helping patrons find alternative, affordable internet services.”

“I have been made aware of several resources that can be used to help better serve the technology and connectivity needs of the members of the public whom we serve.”

“I can sit down with a client and really listen to them and try to get them the services or tech help they need.”

“This program has significantly improved my ability to instruct beginners and provide them with the right resources. Before, I found it challenging to teach those who were new to technology... Through this experience, I've learned effective ways to approach teaching... and I feel much more confident in my ability to help others.”

These insights show that Digital Navigators appreciated the educational aspects of the program and the opportunity to learn more about library patrons and additional ways to support them.

Recommendations

Based on these and other findings found in the report by L&G Research and Evaluation Consulting, this final section suggests future directions for Digital Navigator services in the Southeastern region of New York. These include the following:

Leverage Digital Navigator programs to build and strengthen community partnerships.

Data gathered by the Southeastern NY Library Council show that many new community connections were made through the program. These include partnerships between public libraries and organizations serving older adults, and other organizations, such as soup kitchens, schools, churches, and local businesses. As a result, public libraries can leverage Digital Navigators to help create and sustain new and existing partnerships to promote digital equity.

Offer Digital Navigators as a professional development opportunity.

Findings from the study show that Digital Navigators gain both the technical and “soft” skills needed to effectively support community members and their digital equity needs. Public libraries should consider Digital Navigator programs as an opportunity to advance professional development among their staff.

Utilize Digital Navigators for resource sharing and coalition building.

The Southeastern NY Library Council’s cohort model allowed Digital Navigators to get to know others working in libraries across the region. This was particularly helpful in learning how to navigate and address digital equity challenges experienced by others beyond their individual libraries. This approach offers an opportunity to build and strengthen healthy digital equity ecosystems across a particular library’s region.



Author Bio

Dr. Colin Rhinesmith is a nationally recognized expert on digital inclusion and meaningful broadband adoption initiatives in urban and rural communities. Rhinesmith is an associate professor and director of the Digital Equity Action Research (DEAR) Lab in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. He is also a Research Fellow with the Quello Center at Michigan State University and Co-Editor-In-Chief of The Journal of Community Informatics. Rhinesmith is author of the forthcoming book, titled “Digital Equity Ecosystems: How Community Coalitions Reduce Inequality and Strengthen Democracy” that will be published by the University of California Press in 2026.

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