

Digital Inclusion Program Final Report of the Rapid Assessment

Submitted to
Wireless Philadelphia
and the William Penn Foundation

By the OMG Center for Collaborative Learning
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Executive Summary

In the next several pages, the OMG Center presents the findings of a three month rapid assessment of Wireless Philadelphia's (WP) Digital Inclusion Program (DIP). In response to the need to redirect the Digital Inclusion Program when EarthLink ceased operations in Philadelphia after about a year of partnering with WP to set up the joint venture, OMG worked with WP and the William Penn Foundation to redirect its initial evaluation. All determined that it would be more valuable to WP to have a quick snapshot of progress and challenges to date as it became clear that it would have to rethink its program strategy going forward. To further assist WP leaders, OMG worked closely throughout the rapid assessment with WP staff and board, and Fairmount Ventures, its strategic business planning advisors, by providing quick feedback about what the assessment team was learning.

After a national review of effective practices of citywide wireless efforts and digital inclusion programs, the rapid assessment report discusses the DIP's successes and challenges in its first year of operations. It then offers recommendations for going forward.

Summary Lessons from the Evaluation

Accomplishments

About the WIP Model

- Certain aspects of the WP wholesale model were effective; central to this was working with wireless Internet partners (WIPs) who were the primary on-the-ground distributors of digital inclusion service packages (which include hardware, software, internet access, training and some follow-up technical support) to pre-qualified clients. This allowed WP to easily access large numbers of targeted users who already had existing relationships with the organization, and who already met low-income criteria. This also provided an income source for WP.
- WP was correct in assuming that free computer distribution is a critical element of the DIP and central to any early success.
- For the most part, the sampled wireless Internet partners (WIPs) were successful with meeting their distribution targets; however, service package distribution is not a sole indicator of increased client digital capacity.
- WIPs with more on-site staff technological capability generally developed programs that integrated Internet and computer technology. This helped clients practice computer and Internet use on-site with assistance, thus more effectively building client understanding and capacity to bridge the digital divide.

- WIPs with administrative and technical staff capacity to fully support the bundle distribution and follow up with client support over time were more able to be effective partners.
- The selected WIPs were very diverse in client types, staff DIP administrative capacity, and technology capacity. Not all came to DIP with similar abilities to carry out the work. The rapid assessment learned some important lessons about WIP characteristics that contributed to success. Additional attention should be paid to understanding success.

About Client Use and Early Outcomes

- Clients report learning significant technical skills with the digital inclusion service package and through strong WIP programs integrating package use early on and regularly in program activities.
- These clients continued to use computer and Internet skills on- and offline during and when they completed the program.
- Clients also report getting technical assistance through strong WIP programs and through experienced friends and family members, and that access to support is essential early on.
- There is an early indication that increasing individual client capacity to use computers and the Internet may spread to families and friends in communities and thus have indications to benefit the broader, close-in community.

About WP

- For the most part, WP staff was well viewed by all interviewees, and admired for their passion and commitment to the work.
- The experience of the evaluation indicates that WP staff and board are adaptable, flexible, and eager to learn from the first year.

What Were the Challenges

About the WIP Model

- Given that success factors of a WIP model were not initially known, it is understandable that WIP selection was not initially based on organizational capacity to do this work. Nonetheless, the lack of WIP technological and administrative capacity overburdened WP with extra technical assistance and administrative processing demands. It also enabled WIPs to distribute digital inclusion service packages clients without meaningful on-site training, follow-up technical assistance, and without the ability to track ongoing client use.

- Driven by meeting WIP targets rather than the quality and means of new digital learning, WP placed too great an emphasis on the number of people signing up rather than the quality of each sign up experience, and what was required to achieve quality.
- WIPs and WP were interested in tracking client outcomes over time; however, WIPs were not selected based on Management Information System (MIS) abilities to do so, nor were they supported to learn to do so. Also, WIPs did not develop agreements with clients to stay in contact for any longitudinal data collection.

About WP

- Overall, given the lack of citywide digital inclusion precedent and its inherent start-up complexity, the staff and board were overly ambitious in setting high performance numbers for short-term outcomes.
- WP's role was clearly defined in planning; however, as a result of EarthLink's departure, their role became confounded with that of the internet service provider (ISP) provider, and often an unsatisfactory one at that.
- In part the result of the above point, in part as a result of EarthLink's departure, WP underestimated the training needs of WIPs to help them develop appropriate, technology-oriented program content.

Recommendations for Going Forward

As WP staff and its board refocus its next phase of work, the evaluation offers the recommendations below based on our assessment.

1. Assume Internet connectivity is essential and be agnostic about the means, but provide computers (preferably laptops), appropriate software, free, reliable connectivity (for up to six months or a year), along with the integrated program training and ongoing technical support.
2. Focus the next two years on six to eight pilot sites, each distributing approximately 50-100 bundles a year. This phase ought to focus on streamlining the acquisition and distribution processes and clarifying the DIP model. WIPs from various fields with distinct clients ought to be selected: youth development, affordable housing, workforce development, and schools are potentially strong areas for partnership
3. Focus on WIP programs that provide quality, integrated learning experiences to small client groups.
4. Develop a set of pilots with a variety of Community Based Organizations (CBOs) based on these criteria:

- a. In Philadelphia neighborhoods or settings that are easily accessible;
 - b. Who demonstrate current program evidence of addressing the digital divide already;
 - c. With on-site dedicated administrative and technology staff for the DIP program,
 - d. With existing WIP programs that integrate technology, or with interest in developing integrated programs beginning from program start-up to finish and on through follow-up;
 - e. With WIP commitments to work with WP and an evaluation team to develop client use and outcome tracking mechanisms during the program and for follow-up;
 - f. And assure a variety of program foci, client types, and ages.
5. Consider the lending library idea for programs as a training method before people get to keep their own hardware. This might help incorporate technology into programs and train people on the equipment they would use -- they don't have to go from desktop to laptop.
 6. Continue and streamline hardware distribution.
 7. As a city leader, build a learning network and community among the different CBOs for field building, and sharing effective practices locally.
 8. WIPs can benefit from ongoing financial support for the development of additional technological capacity; WP can be a citywide advocate for this and also develop a fund to provide matching grants to encourage WIPs to fully commit to partnership.
 9. WP ought to explore what it can offer nonprofits to help design programs and educating employees about how DIP fits in with their program model.
 10. WP may consider offering digital inclusion clients a range of hardware options, including used and new computers offered at discounted rates or with low/zero interest financing. It may be necessary to partner with banks and retailers.