Toni Preckwinkle
Cook County Board President

Cook County
DIGITAL EQUITY ACTION PLAN

October 2023

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Letter from the President

To the Residents of Cook County:

Cook County is the heart of the nation's third-largest metropolitan area. It is home to more than half of both the region's population and its economic activity. Cook County government plays a pivotal role in serving and supporting the needs of those who live, learn, work, and play here.

We also know the quality of digital equity in Cook County affects the economy, wellbeing, and social connection of every resident, though some communities are more affected than others and in unique ways. Cook County is committed to building digital equity for all residents and our first-ever Digital Equity Action Plan charts our path forward.

The plan offers a strategic framework to ensure that all Cook County residents have equitable access to the digital infrastructure, devices and tools to thrive in today's economy and society. It also invites residents, businesses and community organizations to collaboratively build impactful solutions in the areas of digital accessibility, confidence, safety and security, and infrastructure.

To build the plan, under the leadership of our first-ever Director of Digital Equity, Kyla Williams Tate, Cook County consulted extensively with communities across the County. A Guiding Team of digital equity leaders supported and led 12 Community Conversation events, interviews with over a dozen digital equity experts and a public survey that garnered over 3,200 responses.
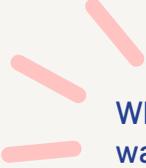
We will continue to hold additional community conversations to sustain and grow the region-wide effort to build digital equity.

This plan marks a significant moment in our ongoing commitment to a more equitable and connected Cook County.

Toni Preckwinkle

President
Cook County Board of Commissioners

Letter from the Director

When I accepted the role of Director of Digital Equity, one of my major commitments was to create the inaugural digital equity action plan. I took this duty to heart and presented a vision to connect our digital equity ecosystem in Cook County.

Connection not only to affordable and quality high-speed internet in communities and residences. Connection not only to free and low-cost digital skill training that helps to improve quality of life. Connection not only to the tools and opportunities to equitably expand access. Connection not only to affordable devices that open pathways of discovery, information sharing, fellowship, networking, laughter, and joy. And connection not only to help us all stay safe when utilizing the internet and other digital moments.

But the TRUE connection is with each other as we build our community's digital ecosystem, together.

We need to be better connected to small businesses and corporations, nonprofits and grassroots organizations, medical facilities, researchers, internet service providers, institutions, utilities, civic technologists, software designers, startups, local governments, churches, block clubs, translators, disability advocates, artists, planners, and others to share expertise and lived experiences.

We need to be better connected to the digital equity champions in communities, some of whom have been doing this work for decades without adequate resources or recognition. We need to continue to strengthen our connection with our elected officials to better inform policy and funding opportunities. And we need to better connect with our residents in their geographies and utilize their languages. We need all of this and likely more to get this right.

The inaugural Cook County Digital Equity Action Plan presents four cornerstone areas of focus to help us organize and connect, and the Cook County Digital Equity Map is a tool we can use to help direct our path. We are also leaving space for the unknown so we can discover more together.

You are all part of our digital equity ecosystem and collectively we must take action in order to advance digital equity in Cook County.

This inaugural plan in its design is just that... a guided call to action with opportunities to connect. I encourage you to see yourself in this plan. Find your place as a consumer, contributor, or creator of digital opportunity and let's connect! Take action in your organization, church, school, or even workplace using one of the worksheets included in the plan. Connect with me if you need help or have questions.

We are Cook County. And we are so much better together and connected.

Thank You!

Kyla Williams Tate

Director of Digital Equity
Cook County Government

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our heartfelt acknowledgements to the dedicated community members who contributed their time, expertise, and passion to help draft our digital equity action plan.

Your valuable insights and input have been instrumental in shaping a comprehensive and inclusive strategy to bridge the digital divide and ensure equitable access to technology for all.

We are grateful for the unwavering support and commitment from individuals and organizations within our community who recognize the importance of addressing digital inequities. Your enthusiasm and collaborative spirit have been crucial in creating a plan that reflects the needs and aspirations of our diverse community. We appreciate the partnership with the City of Chicago's Digital Equity Director, the Chicago Digital Equity Council and the Illinois Office of Broadband/Illinois Broadband Lab.

Special thanks to the Cook County Council of Digital Equity (CODE), Circle Root Collaborative, the Camino Group, and the Suburban Cook County Digital Equity Guiding Team members for their invaluable contributions throughout the planning process. Their expertise, guidance, and tireless efforts have greatly enriched the digital equity plan, making it a truly holistic and impactful initiative. And special thanks to the outreach volunteers, Tenisha Wright, Javari Spencer, and Paris Lane for helping us maximize our efforts in the Southland.

Additionally, we express our gratitude to all the community members who participated in public forums, focus groups, and surveys. Your voices have been heard, and your perspectives have been instrumental in shaping policies and interventions that will promote digital inclusion and create opportunities for all.

We look forward to continued collaboration and partnership as we work together to implement this digital equity plan and create a more equitable and inclusive future for Cook County.

Executive Summary
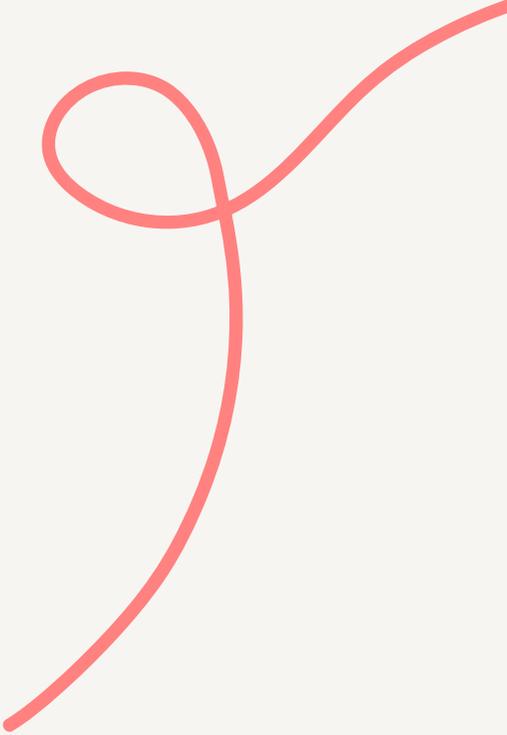
Cook County is a diverse, vibrant ecosystem that includes Chicago's thriving urban environment as well as 70,000 acres of forest and a variety of municipalities in between. It is the most populous county in the state, with over five million people—40% of Illinois residents—living within its borders. Cook County faces a range of technology access challenges—and with this plan, has a unique opportunity to come together to build a bright and equitable digital future for all.

Over 30% of Cook County households are home to children under 18, and the area is home to people from many backgrounds and lived experiences. Spanish-speaking communities, communities of color, immigrants from all over the world, and many others find their home together here. Cook County also holds a range of townships, municipalities, and unincorporated places, for which Cook County government is the primary service provider, convener, and organizer of civic activity.

The City of Chicago is a vibrant economic and political force in the region and the country, with its own digital equity plans, programs, and financial supports. However, this is limited to the Chicago area only, so many residents do not have access to the city's benefits. This plan, therefore, focuses on Cook County's suburban and regional areas, which have unique and wide-ranging needs and is complementary to Chicago's municipal government and institutional supports.

Cook County leadership believes that this plan will not only advance digital equity for residents, but will also work to knit the region together by building connections and collaboration among regional, municipal, and community institutions.

COOK COUNTY'S COMMITMENT TO DIGITAL EQUITY

As government services, social and civic connections, financial services, educational resources, and workforce opportunities increasingly move online, our suburban Cook County communities face a range of challenges. Those challenges include finding quality, affordable broadband internet service; obtaining usable, supported devices; and building the skills and confidence needed to navigate the internet safely and meaningfully.

Cook County President Toni Preckwinkle began addressing the need for digital equity solutions well before the COVID-19 pandemic, recognizing the power of digital inclusion to advance economic, workforce, and educational efforts. Her

focus on digital equity is reflected in the Cook County Equity Fund, which was established by her office in 2020 to intentionally address racial equity in the county. She established the Council on Digital Equity (CODE), a group of local and national advisors who give expertise and guidance as Cook County acts on these issues. President Preckwinkle also developed a partnership with PCs for People Illinois, a group that works to close the digital divide in suburban Cook County and the surrounding areas through its Oak Lawn retail, e-recycling, and refurbishing center.

As the need for digital equity solutions became even more clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, Cook County's communities mobilized to support each other. Building on the foundation created by President Preckwinkle, Cook County's digital equity leaders got children laptops for school, created awareness of discounted internet programs, and helped each other navigate new technologies to get us through the pandemic.

In 2022, Cook County was named one of the Top Ten Digital Counties nationwide by the Center for Digital Government. President Preckwinkle brought on Kyla Williams Tate, a veteran in the digital equity field, as Cook County's first Digital Equity Director. Director Williams Tate started just in time to lead efforts related to federal stimulus packages, including the American Rescue Plan and Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. These packages include more than $65 billion for broadband and digital equity investments nationwide.

President Preckwinkle's Council on Digital Equity (CODE) represents an official cohort in the Cook County digital ecosystem. CODE is comprised of local members and senior advisors from around the U.S. who provide expertise and guidance as Cook County takes action to address digital inequities. From mid-April to late July 2023, the County convened a representative Guiding Team, a subcommittee of CODE, to advise on the community engagement strategy, engage various constituencies, and host a series of in-depth, highly personalized community conversations throughout Cook County.

The Guiding Team met ten times: eight times virtually and twice in person. Together, the County designed Guiding Team meetings to foster trusting relationships among guiding team members and County staff, gather insights into how this issue impacts their constituents, and co-create strategies to best engage residents during this community engagement phase. The Guiding Team helped the County better understand the challenges and key data around digital equity, started a healthy, trusting ecosystem among stakeholders around the issues, informed a vision for the future, and are now partners in co-creating a plan to execute catalytic projects to achieve our collective mission for digital equity.

With this Digital Equity Action Plan, Cook County is renewing its commitment and advancing digital equity further than we could during the pandemic. Our commitment to digital equity prioritizes digital accessibility, confidence, and safety alongside access to the internet. Our goal is for all residents to benefit from and contribute to a growing digital economy, regardless of race, geography, ability, or language.

Cook County can't do this alone. Lasting, meaningful impact is rarely achieved by government alone. As we articulate our commitments with this plan, we are also seeking committed partners to shape and implement the initiatives included here. Our intention is to build from the firm foundation already created by the dedication and leadership of suburban Cook County's residents and organizations and to formalize and invest in these partnerships to knit together our digital equity ecosystem.

This moment in time is critical as federal and state governments plan for the distribution of $65 billion in broadband and digital equity funding set aside in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021. States will release their digital equity plans in late 2023 and early 2024, and will then focus on implementing plans through grants and investments. Making sure these grants and investments go to those who need them most is part of Cook County's commitment to digital equity.

"**Successful digital equity visioning and planning must engage and benefit the people and communities who are meant to be served. It is critical that communities are fully empowered to evaluate and hold accountable those who receive funding to implement solutions.**"

(Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, 2023)

Image credit:
Circle Root Collaborative

Introduction

Image credit: Circle Root Collaborative

Community Stories

"

The wealth gap is growing and that has to do with digital equity.

Accounting clients of mine who need to move from paper to digital budgets ask "Can you do it for me? I need to pay someone to do this for me." But if they knew how to do this themselves, they would save the cost of an accountant and they would have less risk of being taken advantage of financially by people who know their financials better than they do.

Basic accounting tricks should be something we all know and talk about in our homes, but that is not the case. I tell people in my training to go online to use the online IRS paycheck calculator to understand how to save for taxes. But you need to know how to get online first, and **there is a BIG fear of the IRS** as well. My clients are leaving money on the table because they don't know how to use digital tools to lower their tax liability, they aren't investing, and therefore they can't combat inflation, and can't build generational wealth.

Aradia Clark, owner of Peerless Credit Services

Trading your time for income means that your income will always be limited, because your time is limited. This is why people who are living in the cycle of poverty need the knowledge to diversify their income. I really believe that consistent programming should be as available as the local liquor store—we need that balance in our priority areas, especially. We must ensure there are as many opportunities for digital equity as there are places where you can buy a bottle of wine."

– Aradia Clark,
Owner of Peerless Credit Services and Cook County resident

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What is Digital Equity &
why are we talking about it now?

The pursuit of digital equity provides a path for government, residents, businesses, and institutions to follow as we create collective goals for advancement into our 21st-century digital society and economy. To create this plan, we started by asking what kind of digital access, affordability, and quality service do Cook County's residents need to deliver on their hopes for the future? How can we ensure that our communities have the means to use the internet for positive personal, family, and community change?

The Census Bureau's American Community survey data tells us that County residents face real challenges with accessing internet service and internet-enabled devices:

- 27% of Cook County households do not subscribe to home wireline internet service (service delivered via fiber, cable, or digital subscriber line infrastructure)

- 11% of households depend on a cellular data plan to connect to the internet

- 21% don't have a computer in their household

To understand the experiences of Cook County residents more deeply, in summer 2023 the Presidents' Office, led by Digital Equity Director Kyla Williams Tate, partnered with Circle Root Collaborative and a Guiding Team comprised of local leaders to design and implement a community engagement process. This engagement built from the expertise, networks, and values of local leadership in suburban Cook County to understand residents' experiences accessing internet, devices, and digital literacy tools; to catalog digital equity assets that already exist; and to solicit ideas for how to make resources and tools accessible and responsive to the needs of all residents.

The participatory community-based data gathering project is foundational to this plan.

Cook County solicited in-depth feedback from community members with Community Conversations sessions. Representatives of the Guiding Team facilitated these sessions in English and Spanish to allow participants to explore digital equity in their own words and from their perspective, using the lenses of Barriers, Solutions, and Vision to guide the discussion. As part of these sessions, 223 participants countywide submitted detailed written worksheets recording their thoughts. Circle Root Collaborative transcribed, translated (where applicable), anonymized, and compiled these worksheets to develop a nuanced view of the issues from residents' perspectives.

To supplement the deeper, more qualitative engagement of the Community Conversations, Cook County and its partners also employed a 30 to 35-question survey, in both online and paper formats, available in English and Spanish. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete (Appendix 4) and covered six sections: Demographics, Internet Access, Internet Impacts, Barriers to Access, and Tools for Access. Suburban Cook County residents submitted 3,179 completed surveys.

The engagement process provided data to help us better understand how digital access (or lack of access) impacts residents' lives, so that leaders can allocate resources to advance digital equity in suburban Cook County. The more than 3,400 county residents who engaged in our outreach efforts provided valuable insights into their lived experience as well as new solutions to improve access and a powerful vision of how expanded digital equity can support a more equitable economy and culture for all.

Cook County's leadership looks forward to working with all of Cook County's residents, communities, businesses, and leaders in implementing this plan together, a step forward into the digital future we want to see.

Thank You!

Cook County exceeded its summer 2023 digital equity community engagement goals because of the dedication of caring community members who hosted, led, advocated, responded to, and marketed our engagement tools. Because of you, Cook County now has the clearest understanding of this issue that we have ever had. Without the community's support and leadership, Cook County wouldn't be able to chart this path forward.

Who is Affected by Digital Inequity in Suburban Cook County?

Survey responses from suburban Cook County residents provided a wealth of information about digital inequity in the community.

While young people have grown up with technology and benefit from digital resources supplied by schools, survey results revealed that young people in Cook County desire greater access to high-quality, advanced skills training. **Youth** are also affected as much as adults by digital access barriers, such as infrastructure and device gaps that make it difficult to get online and engage with digital resources from skills to entertainment to social connection. Young people also indicated in the survey that they tend to rely on cell phones for internet connectivity, which can limit what they're able to do online.

Responses from **older adults** also indicated several digital access concerns, including affordability and technical knowledge barriers, and cited a desire for skills training opportunities. Lastly, survey results indicated that older adults have serious concerns about their safety online.

The high cost of digital resources and connections is a well-known barrier to digital access, and this theme was also evidenced by survey results. In Cook County, 38% of all survey respondents reported household incomes below $35,000, indicating that internet-related costs could present a real financial burden for many. In fact, this is about the income level (200% below federal poverty guidelines) that makes a household eligible for federal assistance to offset the burden of cost, although many eligible households are not aware of subsidized and low-cost programs available. **Community members with cost concerns** face several layers of digital inequity, as affordability barriers prevent people from buying an internet subscription, buying an adequate computing device, or paying for tech training or tech support services if no free programs are offered in their area.

"WHY DO YOU NOT HAVE A HOME INTERNET SUBSCRIPTION?":

Of the 279 survey respondents who reported that they did not have a home internet subscription, **49%** responded that it was too expensive, **41%** that they accessed the internet via their smartphone, and **31%** reported that they do not have a desktop or laptop computer.

Lack of Home Internet Subscription | Reasons

Legend: Overall · POC · Low-Income HH · Spanish HH · Youth · Older Adults
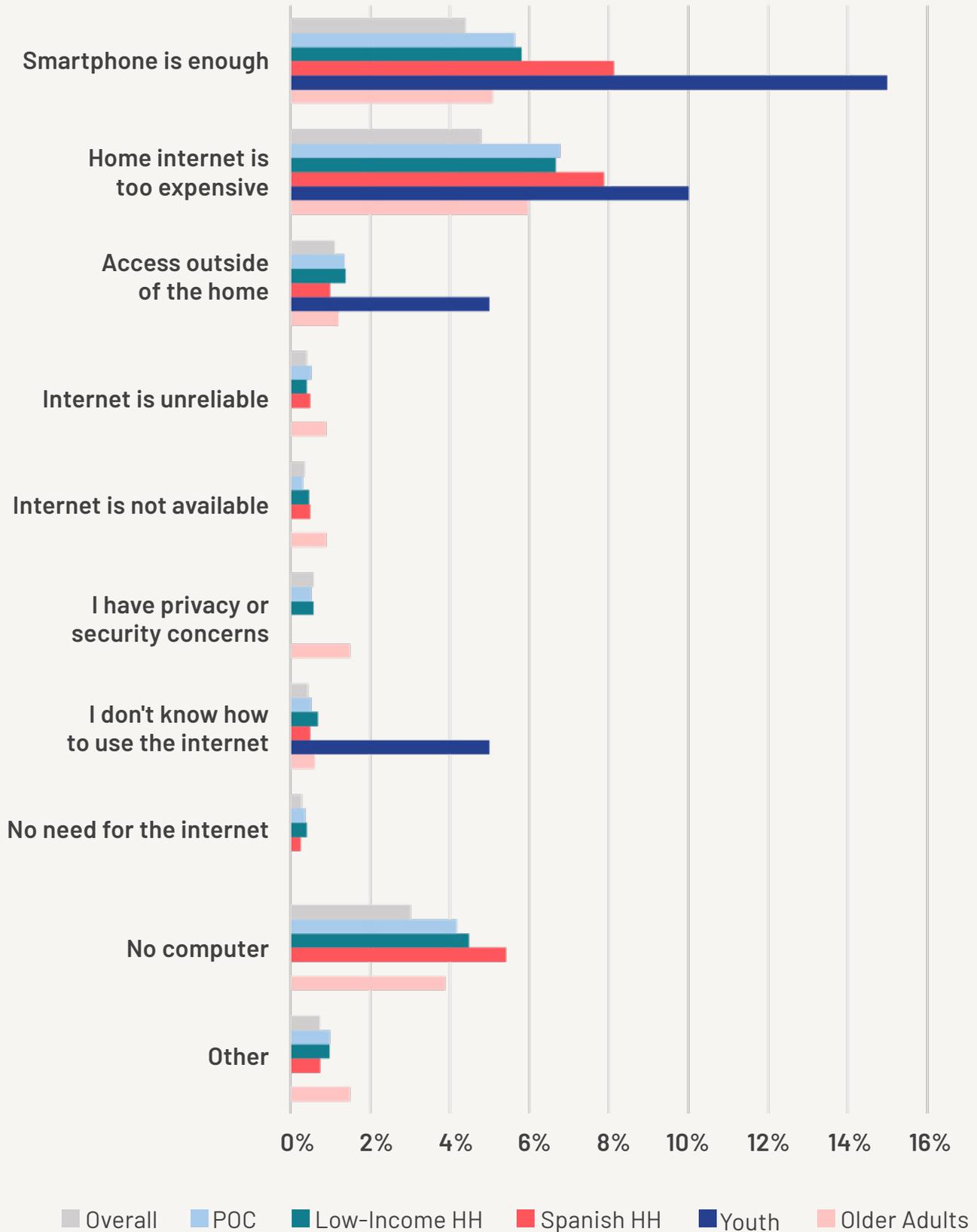
Image credit: Circle Root Collaborative

"My community would [like to] see children getting a better chance of **equitable education**"

– Community Conversation participant

Survey responses and existing data also demonstrate the disproportionate impact of digital inequity for **Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Pacific Islander, Asian American, and other ethnic and racial minority communities,** as well as those impacted by **disabilities, poverty, and language barriers** (Ribble et al., 2023). One specific concern is the ongoing practice of digital redlining – underinvestment in particular areas– which results in poor or no connectivity in low-income communities, especially communities of color.

Image credit:
Circle Root Collaborative

In this action plan, you will see various analyses that connect understood digital equity barriers to a specific population or demographic to organize learnings from the community engagement process. However, **it is important to keep in mind that any member of any demographic can experience one, some, or all the digital equity barriers described in this action plan.** These barriers are multifaceted, meaning we cannot "cherry pick" when it comes to solving digital equity barriers—we cannot solve for one without solving for all. Lastly, these barriers are intersectional, and therefore must be understood through other social structures of exclusion, such as redlining, racism, classism, and xenophobia.

We heard in virtually all of our Community Conversations that Cook County residents do not see internet access and use as a nice-to-have luxury, but as a connection to jobs, education, health, housing, and opportunity. In the words of one participant, "the internet is no longer a commodity but a necessity."

We also heard that the internet is a place of exploration, potential, and connection, especially for youth with boundless curiosity. And, at the same time, it is a place of risk and caution for many, as so many neighbors and family members get trapped by scams and schemes, are targeted by online threats and harassment, or give up important personal data unintentionally. Addressing the reasons people don't adopt the internet, such as cost and online threats, is just as important as expanding infrastructure.

Digital equity ecosystems are interactions between individuals, populations, communities, and their larger social and technical environments that shape digital inclusion outcomes and work in local communities.

Building towards digital equity is a way to reach towards the positive potentials of our emerging digital economy and society, especially by putting equity front and center. We don't want only to close the "digital divide" between internet "haves" and "have-nots"—but to build an ecosystem of support across all localities and communities for continuing tech support, knowledge, skills, and an ecosystem of support and connection needed to create real, positive change in peoples' lives.

AN ECOSYSTEM APPROACH

As Cook County prepares to set the groundwork for unified goal-setting and investment in digital equity solutions, this plan provides opportunities for a community-wide conversation to continue, led by all interested residents and inviting in neighbors, relatives, and new and old friends.

THE
Digital Equity
ECOSYSTEM

Part of this process is recognizing the digital equity work that is already being done throughout Cook County. While we are making significant progress toward digital equity, better coordination and information sharing will help reduce inequities by aligning approaches and leadership. Working together, communities can collaborate to better understand the issues and build digital equity solutions with the help of local leaders, churches, schools, libraries, small and large businesses, and others, with the committed support of Cook County.

Public Libraries

School Libraries

Religious Institutions

Digital Navigators

Community Centers

Digital Equity

Wraparound Service Providers

Internet Service Providers

Community Groups

Social Services

Local Government

YOU

Digital equity ecosystems are interactions between individuals, populations, communities, and their larger social and technical environments that shape digital inclusion outcomes and work in local communities.

An **ecosystem approach** relies on support from multiple organizations and informal groups to welcome new users into digital adoption and share resources, social norms, practices, and support related to using these technologies.

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County Commitments to Advancement of the Ecosystem

Cook County is coming to the table by committing to a set of actions that will support collaborations and partnerships.

COMMITMENT –

Cook County commits to advocate, promote, and implement core digital equity standards, agreements, and best practices including:

- Digital equity resources, knowledge base, internet and device standards, and principles hosted online.
- Accessibility checklists and support
- County-wide digital equity calendar and resource-sharing hub
- Maps and data on broadband infrastructure
- Features and content such as community news
- Knowledge sharing including expertise that can be leveraged for Digital Navigators and Help Desk resources
- Workforce and economic development digital skills resources
- Connecting public and school libraries to ensure that systems are working together to prepare kids for a digital future

...through key collaborations among:

- Office of the President and Offices Under the President
- Cook County Council of Digital Equity (CODE) and sub-committees
- Illinois Office of Broadband/ Illinois Broadband Lab Chicago Digital Equity Coalition and other collar county or statewide coalitions
- Elected officials and the National Association of Counties (NACo)

COMMITMENT –

Cook County commits to build a digital equity ecosystem and advance digital equity goals through deep partnerships with:

- Libraries and schools
- Community-based and faith-based organizations and institutions
- Workforce and economic development organizations
- Internet service providers (ISPs) and innovators of digital infrastructure
- Philanthropy, investors, as well as businesses

KEY COLLABORATORS AND COMMUNITIES OF DIGITAL EQUITY PRACTICE

Cook County will work with key collaborators and communities to:

- Strengthen partnerships with Cook County
- Discover, organize, and take action
- Share information and create resource opportunities
- Experiment, innovate, and document
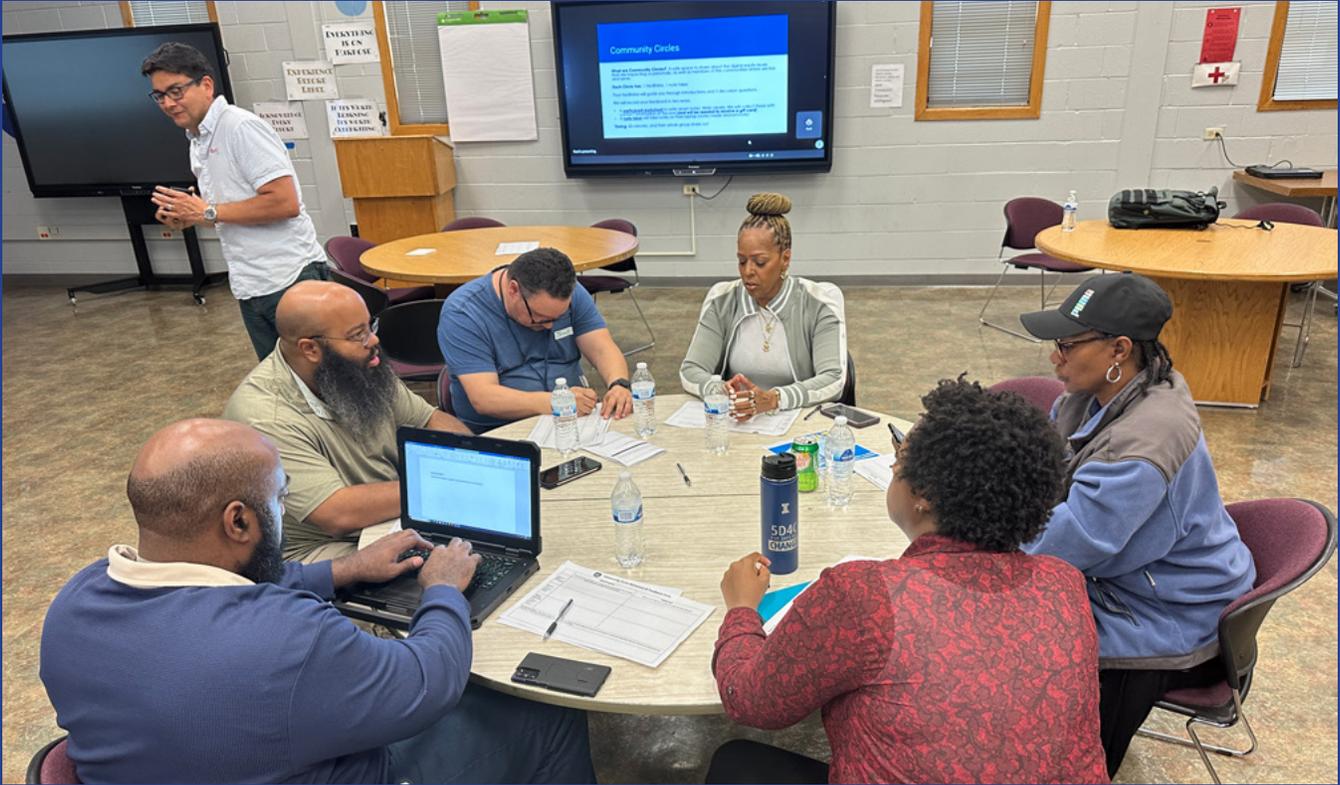- Explore, challenge, and create data

Image credit: Circle Root Collaborative

To kick-off this ecosystem approach, Cook County will rely on the Suburban Cook County Digital Equity Guiding Team and its CODE Advisory Board. Both of these bodies will advise, support, and facilitate ongoing Community Conversations and efforts that help us understand community needs, goals, and perspectives. Cook County will also build a broader partnership with libraries and schools to support and advance digital equity efforts.

We invite every person reading this plan to find ways to be a leader and discuss digital equity with your community. You could hold a community conversation at a barbecue, a PTO meeting, a board or council meeting, or a birthday party. The idea is to get everyone talking about what digital equity means for your community, and how we put the pieces together to make an impact. People have always been what makes places special, and Cook County thrives because of its residents. We've built our communities of today together—let's continue to build our digital communities of tomorrow together.

Structure of this Plan

The following sections of this plan comprise four **digital equity cornerstones** built from what we heard from Cook County residents in the summer 2023 engagement process.

Access

Ensure that all residents can afford high-quality internet and devices, and can access tools and support to use them.

Confidence

Ensure that residents have the skills and comfort to navigate and use the internet to meet their needs and improve quality of life.

Safety

Ensure residents feel safe and secure in digital environments and can protect themselves online.

Infrastructure

Ensure that Cook County has sufficient physical infrastructure (conduit, cables, towers, and data centers) to support healthy, robust internet service for all.

For each of these cornerstones, the plan proposes a set of IMPACT solutions to be undertaken through collaborations between Cook County government and regional partners. These solutions, programs, and ideas are drawn from everything we heard in our Community Conversations and surveys, as well as input from leaders across the county. Each of these solutions is designed to be impactful right now and in the long term, to address the intersection of diverse community needs, and to lay the groundwork for long-term success. We look forward to hearing ideas for collaboration and partnership with you to make these proposals a reality.

IMPACT SOLUTION

Innovative
Replication of a successful model or new model that meets the needs of County residents and builds equity.

Measurable
Defined metrics to track, qualify, quantify, and "storify" progress based on agreed-upon impact goals.

Purposeful
Activities that are intentional, useful, relevant, and specific, with a vision of the change we want to see.

Actionable
Mindset, attitude, or strategy focused on taking practical steps to change course or improve circumstances.

Collaborative
Joining forces and working collectively toward shared goals or objectives.

Timely
Activities meet current, demonstrated needs and create strategic pathways for bigger goals.

Activity for Community-Led Digital Equity Conversations

We offer the following activity as a way for communities to engage in a conversation about "digital equity... for what?" What problems do we want to solve, and what opportunities are opened up, through engaging with technology? Print out this 4-square, or use a whiteboard or big pad, and take some time to sit with your community members and get the conversation started in your area.

*adapted from the Boggs Center's Detroit Summer Program

Solutions 4Square (about 20 mins.)

- Write the issue or problem in the box.
- In the top left: What can individuals do to address the issue?
- In the top right: What can we do as a community to address the issue?
- In the bottom left: What can we do at the municipal/county/state level?
- In the bottom right: What could be done at the global level?
- Go back through the grid and write down the connections between the quadrants. How are each of the quadrants connected?

This activity is great for understanding the complexity of a problem and generating solutions that can be used on multiple levels, moving from personal space to global impact.

Digital Equity Issue/Problem
(Examples: People aren't able to use telehealth services; Kids can't access online school)

Individual

Community

City/State

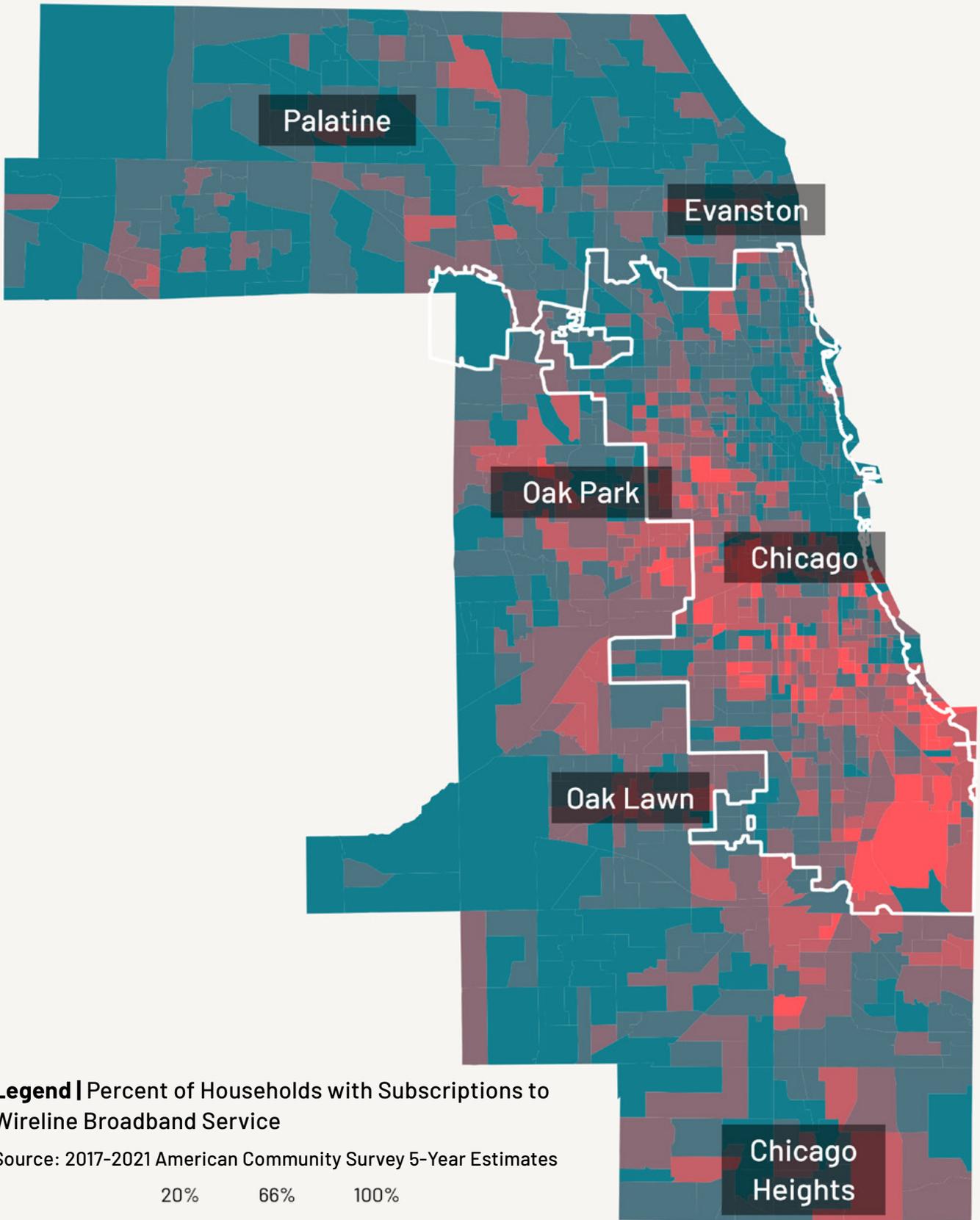**Global**

Subscription Takeaways

Red areas on the map show Cook County communities, particularly in the Southlands, with lower rates of subscription to wireline broadband services. "Broadband" means **fast, high-quality internet service,** and "wireline" services are delivered over fiber, cable, and digital subscriber line (DSL) infrastructure.

There are many reasons why a household might not subscribe to broadband, including a lack of adequate broadband service at their location or a monthly cost that is out of reach.

Palatine

Evanston

Oak Park

Chicago

Oak Lawn

Chicago Heights

Legend | Percent of Households with Subscriptions to Wireline Broadband Service

Source: 2017–2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

20%   66%   100%

0%   51%   80%
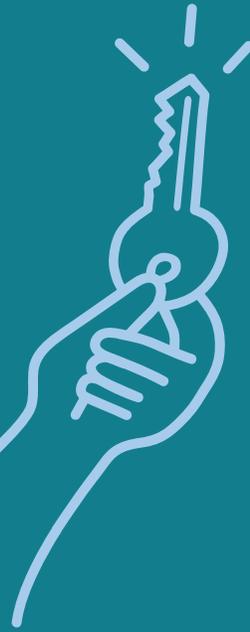
Cornerstone 1

Accessibility

The vision of Accessibility is that everyone has the digital tools and resources they need to fully participate in our twenty-first century digital society.

To achieve this vision, quality internet service and devices must be available and priced within reach for all, accessible via a variety of languages, and with appropriate accommodations for those facing various access challenges, such as those living with disabilities. This cornerstone ensures that everyone has a reliable connection to the internet that fits in their monthly budget, access to internet-enabled devices—like laptops, smartphones, and tablets—and access to quality, accessible technical support.

SERVICE AFFORDABILITY

Based on learnings from Cook County's summer 2023 collaborative outreach effort with the Circle Root Collaborative and the Digital Equity Guiding Team, suburban Cook County residents in general are paying more for their internet than they can afford. **For the nearly 8% of survey respondents that do not have a home internet connection, prohibitive cost is the primary reason cited.** Among those who do have home internet, many are paying more for the connection than what works for their budget. These cost concerns mean that internet service is either entirely out of reach or a source of strain for many residents.

$41-60 — Monthly bill

$51-60 — Price at which the internet would become too expensive

Suburban Cook County Residents

"**The main issue for my household is affordability. Internet services seem to be rising to unreasonable prices,** but since it's so essential now for education and work we have to find a way to pay."
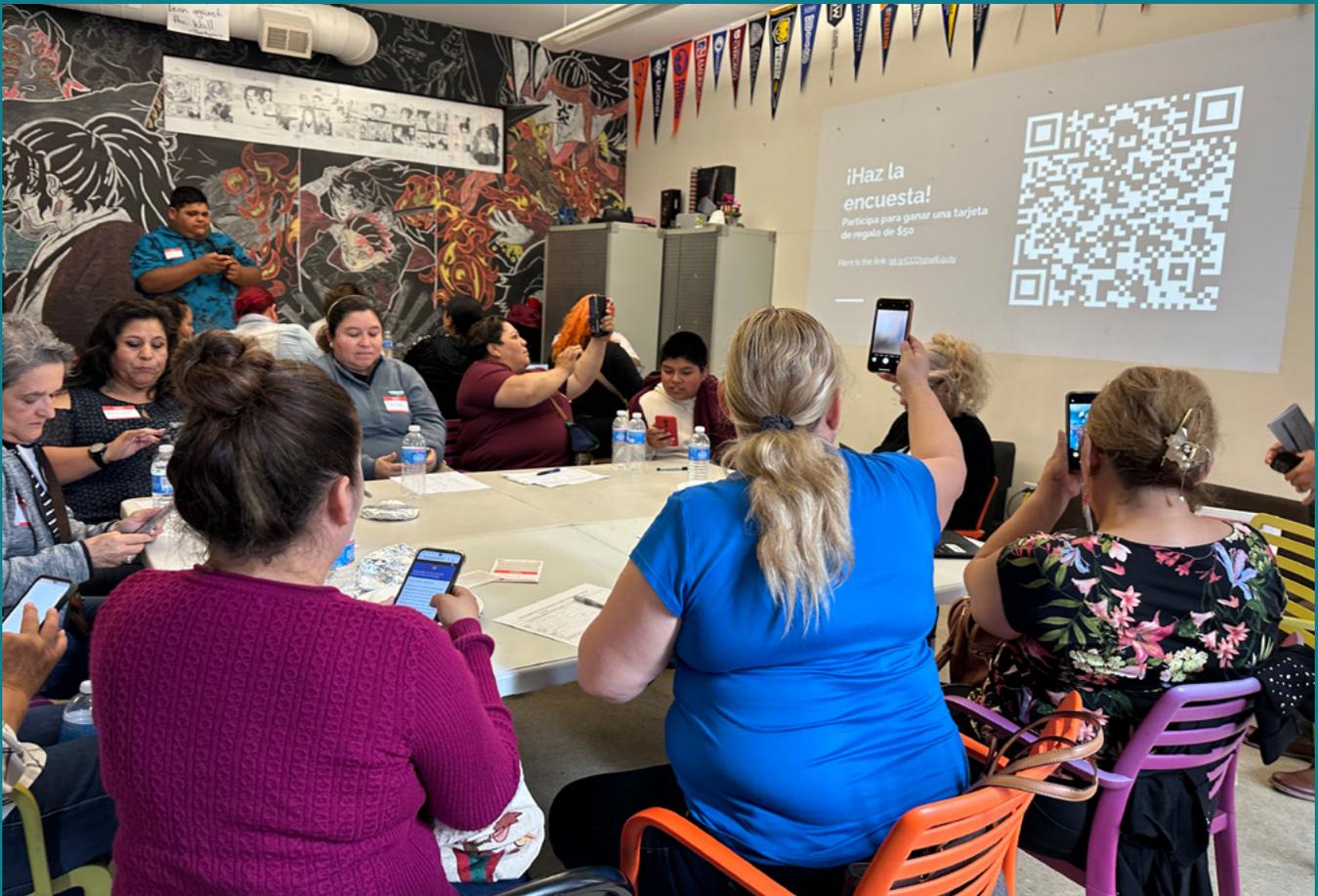
– Community member

Image credit: Circle Root Collaborative

"**Que es muy caro tener internet rapido, solo podemos tener.**"

– Community member

The lack of affordable options affects households with lower incomes and middle-class families who don't qualify for assistance programs. Many Community Conversation participants said that they could only afford low-tier services that don't meet their needs, and that the better-quality services were out of reach for them. Nationally, people in lower-income households are more likely to use a smartphone as their only internet connection at home (Pew Research Center). Cellular plans are important for being able to get online while on the go, but can be limiting when used as a primary home internet connection. Data caps and device constraints limit what smartphone-only users can do with an internet connection. The cost of the internet can be stressful for older adults in particular. Many retirees are operating on a fixed income, which can make it difficult to carve out funds for home internet. This can be particularly isolating, as the internet can be a critical source of social connection and a conduit to resources for older adults.

> **"In today's world you have an internet connection or face isolation. As a retiree, my limited mobility forces the issue. Banking, healthcare and medical attention, food, medicine, and so forth are all tied to the internet."**
>
> – Community member

Some resources exist today to ease the cost of internet access, like the Affordable Connectivity Program —a federal fund to subsidize low-cost plans—and eligibility-based low-cost internet programs offered by internet providers. However, these programs haven't solved the internet affordability issue. Over one-third of surveyed respondents in areas of Cook County with lower rates of internet subscription had not heard of available affordability programs.
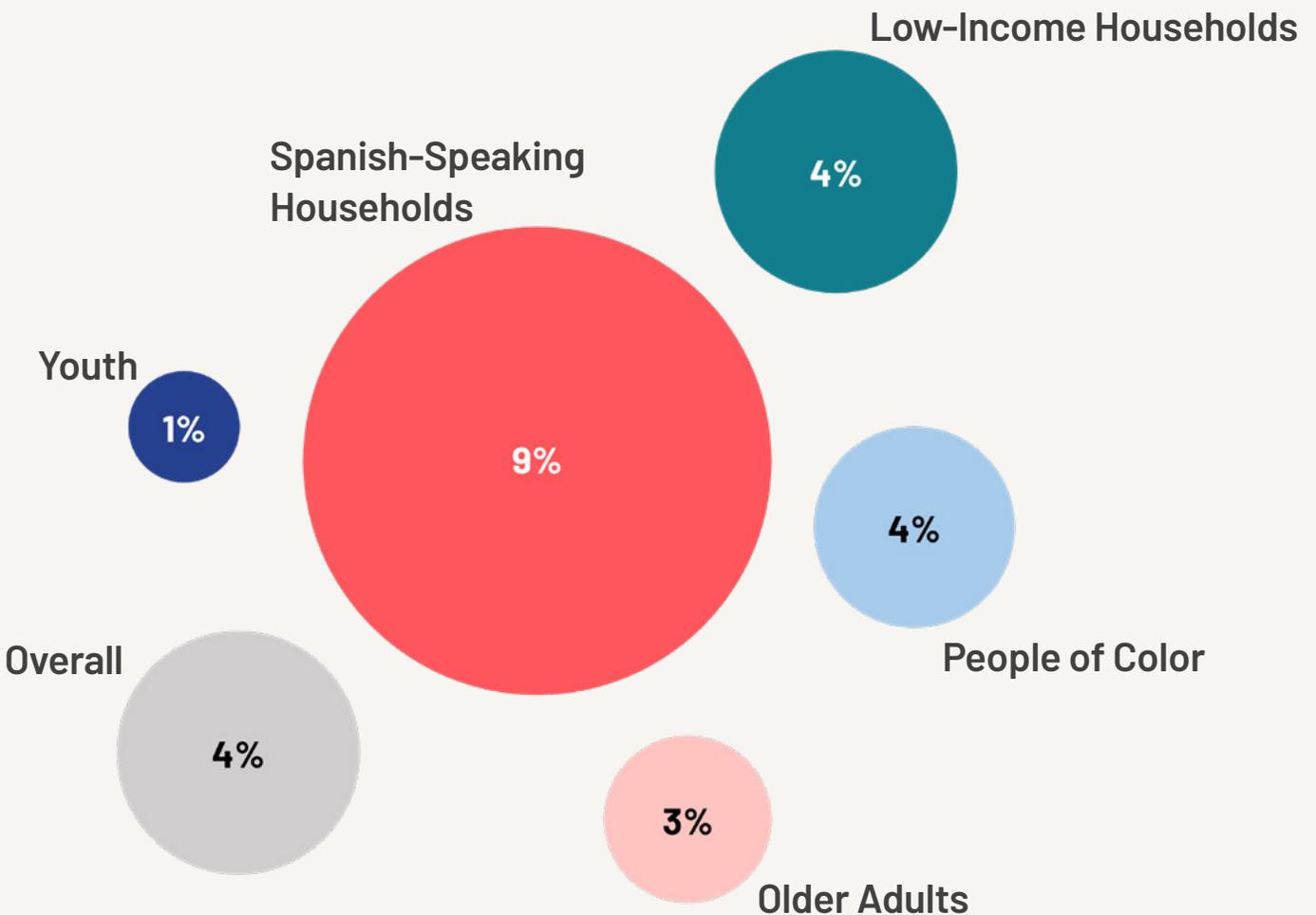
Of survey respondents who had heard of these programs but had not enrolled, more than 1 in 5 said they ran into application difficulties, including eligibility challenges due to billing issues from the past. Additionally, the future of the federal subsidy is unclear, as Congress has not renewed the program past 2023. There is a need to develop subsidy programs and low-cost plans that do not rely on the federal Affordable Connectivity Program.

ACCESS TO DEVICES

Four percent of survey respondents reported that a smartphone was the only device they had to access the internet at home, and the Census Bureau's American Community Survey data indicates that this is true for about 9% of residents across Cook County. While smartphone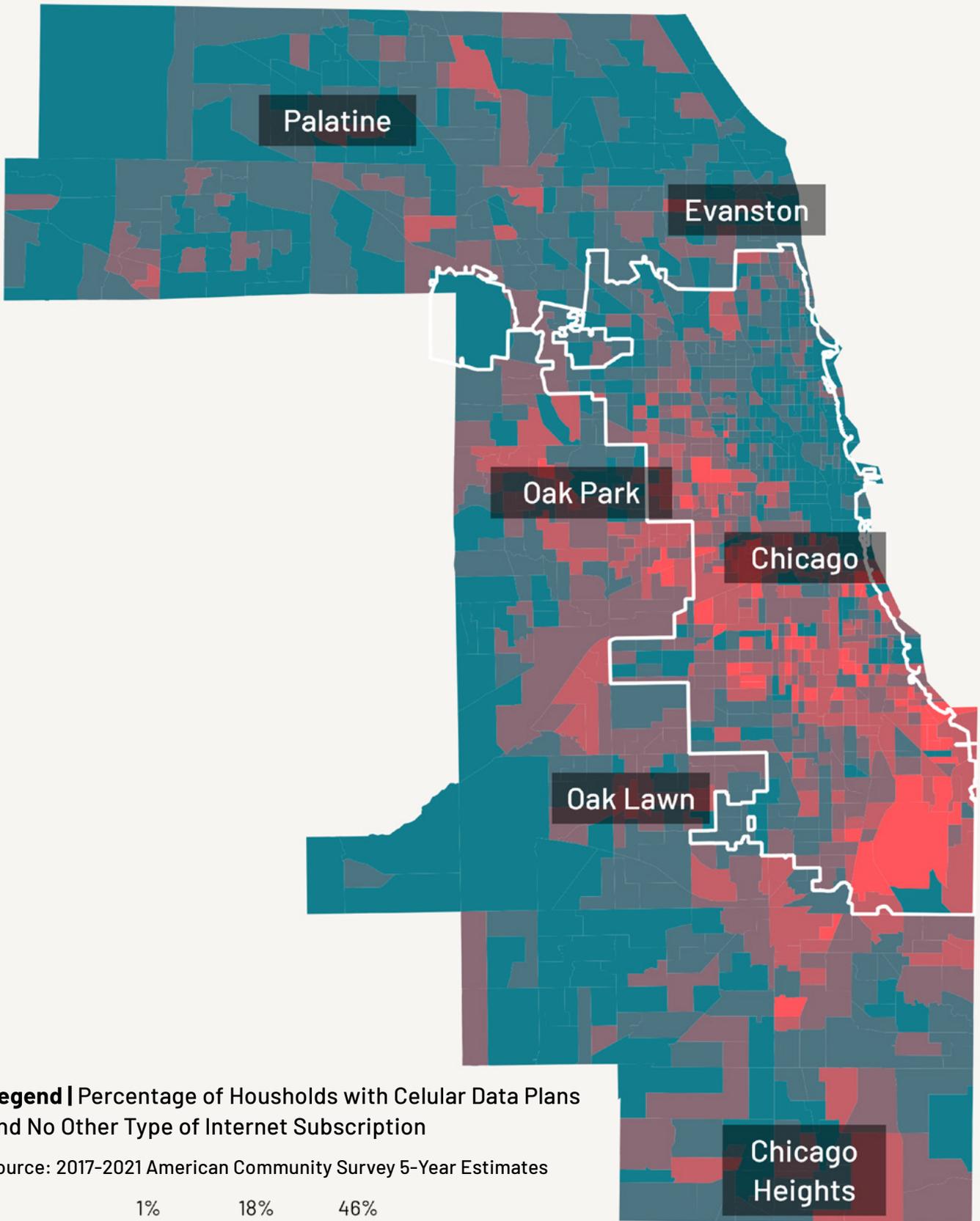s are powerful tools, there are some tasks they aren't ideal for, like doing homework, applying to a job, or engaging in creative and artistic projects. Not having access to devices that meet your needs can significantly limit how you use the internet. In fact, about a third of those we surveyed who don't have home internet say the reason is that they also don't have a desktop or laptop.

Devices | Smartphone Only

Low-Income Households

4%

Spanish-Speaking Households

9%

Youth

1%

4%

People of Color

Overall

4%

3%

Older Adults

The cost of getting new computers, laptops, and tablets can be a barrier, especially when there's a seemingly constant need to upgrade your device to meet the demands of school or work. And while there's a need for more affordable device options, participants in Community Conversations also pointed out a need for high-quality devices and support for those devices to meet residents' needs. Refurbished and secondhand devices can be a helpful way to access the internet, but may not always perform in the way we need them to, so more creative solutions are needed in this area.

39

Legend | Percentage of Housholds with Celular Data Plans and No Other Type of Internet Subscription

Source: 2017-2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

1%   18%   46%

0%   11%   26%

Cellular Data Only Takeaways

Cellular data plans, while sufficient for some online tasks, are **often not robust enough to allow users to fully participate in all internet activities.** This suggests that households with only cellular data plans and no other type of Internet subscription, are limited in their ability to visit websites, conduct virtual meetings, access telehealth, and conduct many other activities necessary for full participation in society.

Communities near Cicero, Oak Park, and Chicago Heights, colored in red on this map, have higher rates of reliance on cellular data plans as the only way they access the internet at home.

ACCESSIBILITY FOR EVERYONE

In Cook County, over one third of residents speak a language other than English at home, nearly seven percent of those under age 65 live with a disability, and sixteen percent are over age 65 (U.S. Census Bureau). Many internet and computer resources are not made available in languages other than English nor with the necessary accommodations to support those with disabilities or other special navigation needs. Without accounting for these considerations, digital accessibility will remain unachievable for a large percentage of the Cook County community.

Accessibility means that people with different abilities have the specialized support they need to equitably participate in our digital society and economy. This indicates a need for assistive technology like screen readers to use the internet, and essential online services that are navigable for all. Understanding the unique digital and access needs of under-served and marginalized communities, including communities of color and non-English speaking communities, is one of Cook County's core responsibilities.

$41-60
$61-70

Spanish Speakers

Monthly bill

Price at which the internet would become too expensive
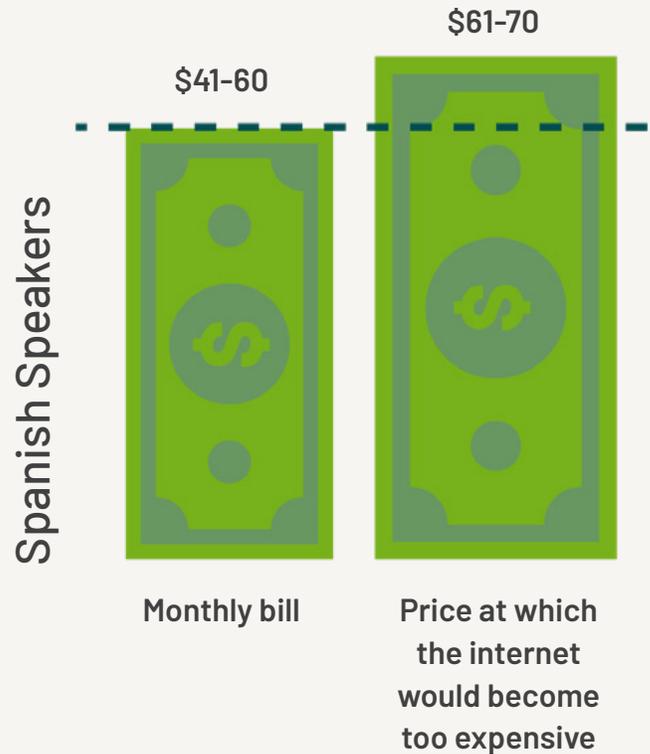
SO, HOW DO WE ACHIEVE DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY IN OUR COMMUNITY?

Accessibility can be achieved when we intentionally design technology policies, programs, products, and services that reduce and eliminate historical, institutional, and structural barriers to access and use of technology.

Participants in the digital equity engagement effort said that we will know that Accessibility is achieved when parents have the chance to work remotely, seniors are able to use telehealth services without leaving their house unless necessary, and family and friends can connect more easily via videochat if physical visits are not an option. When we see residents leverage digital access as a tool for unlocking job and career opportunities, creating a pathway for economic development for themselves, their households, and their communities, we'll know we are on track to improving digital accessibility.

IMPACT Solution: Low-Cost and Subsidized Internet Plans

Cook County will conduct outreach in partnership with community-based organizations and agencies already supporting residents in other ways—such as schools, affordable housing, and social service providers—to support residents in enrolling in subsidized internet programs like the Affordable Connectivity Program and other low-cost internet plans.

Cook County will also seek to support the Illinois Office of Broadband as it develops low-cost internet solutions. Expanding outreach for enrollment, especially offline and in established social networks, will help direct these existing benefits to County residents to bring internet access within reach. Finally, Cook County will coordinate with the City of Chicago and State of Illinois to advocate that internet service providers address eligibility requirements that lock people in need out of low-cost plans, and to encourage additional partners to create new low-cost plan solutions.

IMPACT Solution: Expand Public Wi-Fi

Cook County will leverage existing resources, including building from County fiber resources where possible, to provide bandwidth for home-grown public Wi-Fi networks throughout Cook County. Public Wi-Fi and home connections can be built and managed by small ISPs and even libraries, churches, schools, hospitals, and other community anchor institutions. Ideally, these expanded networks will allow for in-home use, increasing the privacy experience for those on a public network. Cook County will also partner with organizations to encourage the creation of a Digital Stewardship program to train residents as Wi-Fi installers and community network managers. Digital Stewardship, a model piloted in Detroit, New York City, Seattle, and rural Tennessee, trains community residents as the stewards of technologies for their communities, including through building, maintaining, and expanding local Wi-Fi services.

IMPACT Solution: High-Quality Device Access

Cook County will work to drive innovative solutions for expanded access to high-quality devices through partnerships with schools, libraries, and community-based organizations that provide digital skills training. Cook County is looking to develop a device voucher/trade-in program supported through public-private partnerships and existing device access programs. It is also considering a Learn-to-Earn program supported by program providers (libraries, schools, higher education). These programs will consider eligibility criteria beyond poverty status so that more people can access devices. Cook County will identify and support partner organizations with a focus on device access and device maintenance, and will work to grow this network to ensure capacity throughout suburban Cook County.

Accessibility Checklist for Organizational Digital Equity

Digital Accessibility Checklist (about 10 mins.)

Accessibility is a goal for all! Communities and groups can use this checklist to set goals and targets for digital equity activities and resources they are offering.

LANGUAGE

- Make sure translated materials are available in the languages spoken by participants.

- Include explicit information about available translation and/or interpretation services in all promotion and registration materials.

- Be sensitive and use inclusive language that will make participants feel comfortable and welcome.

ACCESSIBILITY

- When planning a virtual event, consider accessibility concerns like closed captioning and how interpreters, if needed, will be visible to your audience on your streaming platform.

- When planning virtual events with ASL interpreters in which you will project content on a screen, be sure to distribute materials in advance. Screen-shared materials may not be accessible to those relying on an interpreter.

- Consider how different streaming platforms accommodate different users' needs and adjust accordingly when possible.

PROGRAMMING

- Ensure all programs that involve digital equity components, such as education, job training, devices distribution, are developed with an equity lens.

- Provide opportunities to learn digital skills both online and in-person.

- Ensure your organization has the network performance needed to support digital programming.

- Whenever possible, make sure that trainers reflect and are at home with the communities they are working with.

- Ask for consent prior to recording a virtual session or using people's names or personal information in a public session.

- Review the privacy and data policies of any third-party service or platform you are asking participants to use, and change out platforms or services if needed.

POLICY

- Ensure policy and practices support positive outcomes for all learners.

- Set accountability requirements for all partners, including institutions and those that provide internet services.

- Devise sustainability plans so that your programming can support people long-term.

- Ask members of your organization and/or the people you serve what you can do to improve access to digital resources.

- Don't over-collect data you won't use and protect the data you do use. If you don't need it, delete it!
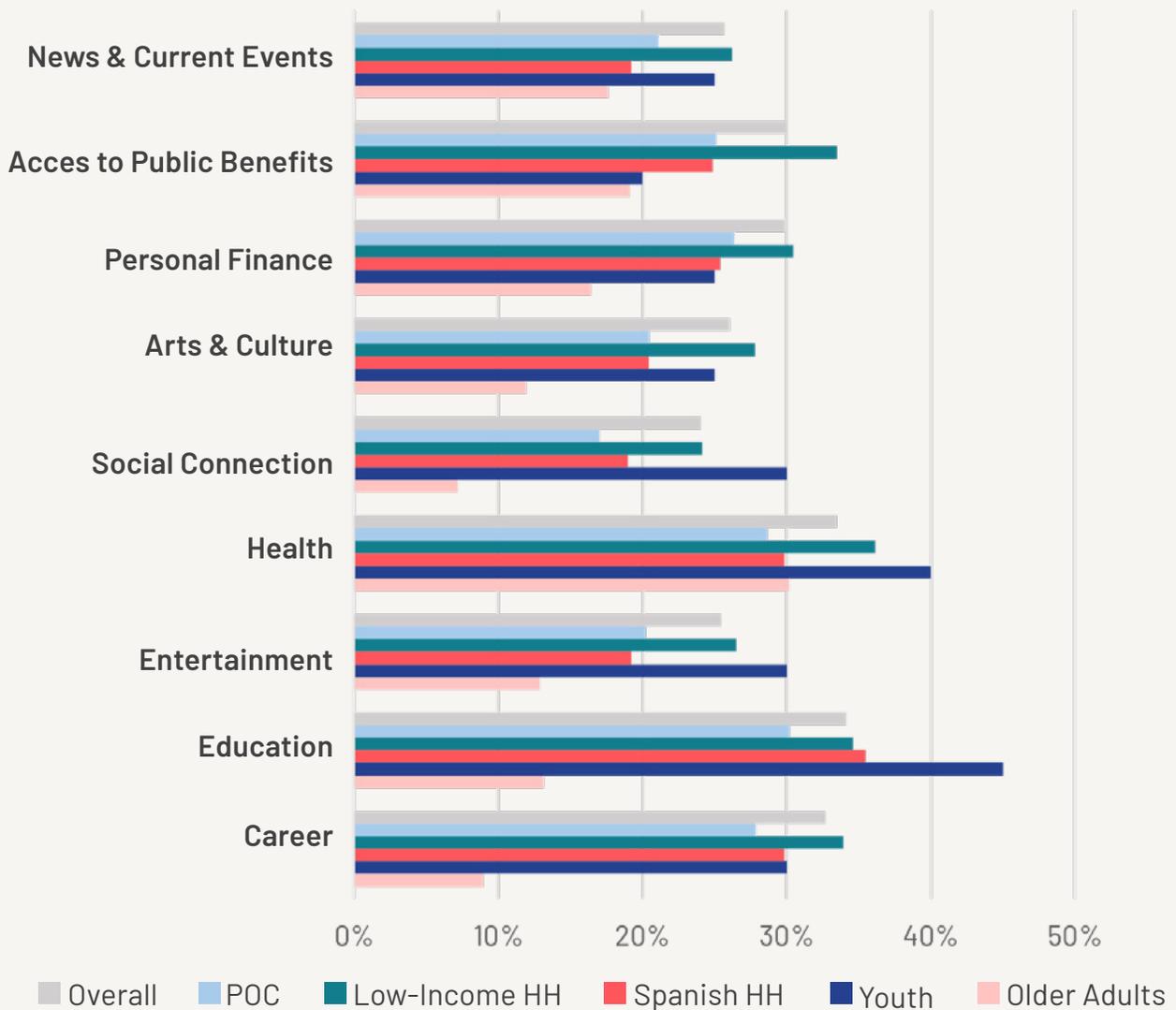
Cornerstone 2

Confidence

The vision for digital Confidence is that everyone feels comfortable and confident while using technology and the internet.

This will mean different things to different people and communities. For some, this may mean using technology to find better job opportunities, learn online, or find services and do shopping or banking. For others, it may mean using technology to stay connected to friends and family or pursue a hobby. And for most people, it's multiple things. Feeling comfortable with the basics of going online and using different devices and platforms can help people use the internet in new and meaningful ways, and to build new skills.

Interest in Improving Skills | Highest Priority

Legend: Overall, POC, Low-Income HH, Spanish HH, Youth, Older Adults

Categories (top to bottom): News & Current Events, Acces to Public Benefits, Personal Finance, Arts & Culture, Social Connection, Health, Entertainment, Education, Career

X-axis: 0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%

"The school doesn't teach us enough about how to work computers. There is no local place where they help us learn."

– Community member

"There is a great need for technical support and education, especially for adults."

– Community member

"There are not enough personal training and times for courses. Basic training is needed that non-technical people can understand."

– Community member

With this cornerstone, we will work toward our communities having the necessary digital confidence to access all the benefits of technology, from healthcare to the digital economy to education to essential services. Through this cornerstone, communities will work with Cook County to achieve these goals:
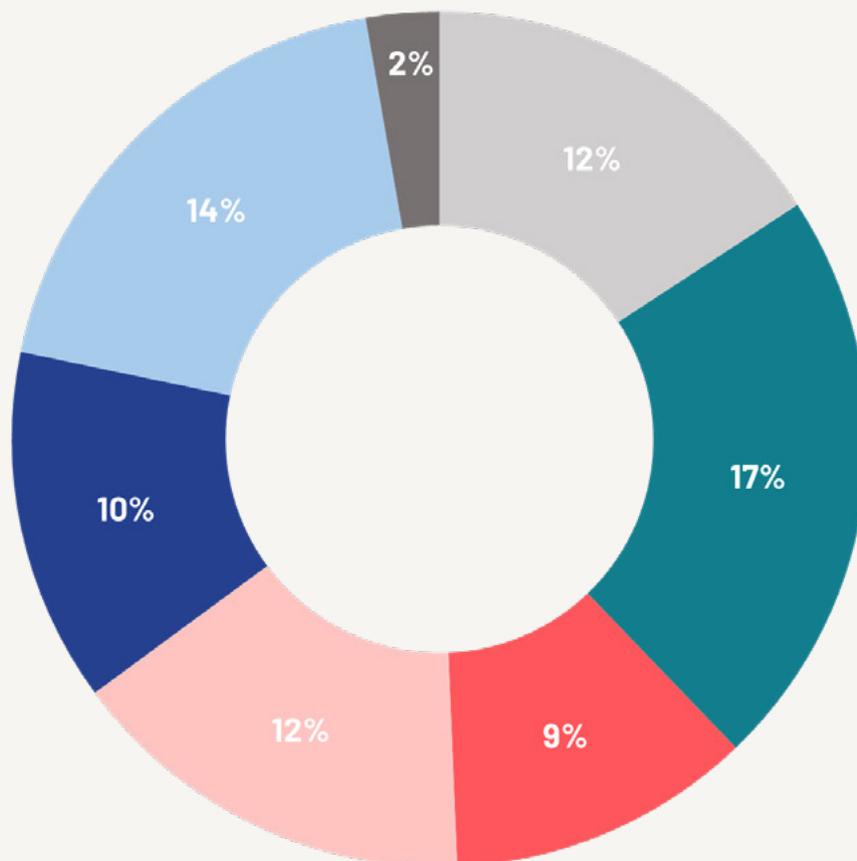
- Easily accessible training and support options for all from organizations they know and trust.

- Opportunities to learn cutting-edge skills in new and fun ways.

- Learning together, so that people are online with their friends and neighbors.

- Paid internships, externships, and apprenticeships for the jobs of today and tomorrow.

- Pursuing creative goals.

In our community conversations, many participants cited a lack of basic digital skills, technical knowledge, and vocabulary as a barrier to getting online and making use of technology. This theme was most evident among older adults and Spanish speakers. Among survey respondents, nearly 40% reported at least one online task they wanted help with.

Digital Skills Gaps

Cook County residents reported that there were many activities they would like to do online, but don't know how or need help with.

Legend:
- Video Calls (12%)
- Email (10%)
- Streaming Video or Audio (17%)
- Use Online Apps (14%)
- Online Gaming (9%)
- Other (2%)
- Web Searches (12%)

CONFIDENCE SUPPORT SOURCES

We also learned from the survey that suburban Cook County residents are reaching out for digital assistance. Respondents reported that they would most likely seek help from a family member (81%) or friend (78%). They were next most likely to seek help from an internet service provider (74%). The public institution from which they were most likely to seek help is the public library (71%). Surprisingly, they were least likely to seek help from a K-12 school (56%).

Community conversation participants expressed a need for high-quality, face-to-face training and classes, close to their community and in their primary language, offered by trusted instructors. Participants cited programs available through their kids' K-12 schools but noted that they sought longer, more tailored, and more frequently available programs. People expressed interest in learning a variety of topics, including basic computer and web browsing, internet safety, coding, business, and accessing medical and mental health services online.

> **"It is important to have internet but also to know how to use it properly to help our children."**
>
> – Community member

> **"Create digital literacy classes in schools that are available to parents."**
>
> – Community member

SO, HOW DO WE INCREASE THE FEELING OF CONFIDENCE FOR COOK COUNTY RESIDENTS?

A key tactic will be providing additional support, resources, and train-the-trainers programs with public institutions, specifically libraries, who are one of the most trusted digital equity resources. Cook County and its partners are committed to working with libraries to ensure they have everything they need to support their community through digital learning, and to expand educational content to address more learning needs and desires. Many study participants, especially Spanish speakers, suggested classes that focus on parents so that they can help their children with educational applications, classes, and internet safety.

WE'LL KNOW CONFIDENCE HAS BEEN ACHIEVED WHEN...

Every region in Cook County has access to digital education, training, devices, software, and pilot programming. Resources are available for both residents-at-large and populations with additional needs (disabled, disenfranchised, older adults, language, and others). Residents understand that confidence opens up educational opportunities, access to information, and connection to loved ones and community. And they know that confidence can lead to career opportunities, a sense of digital self-determination, a reduction in feelings of isolation, and greater civic participation.

IMPACT Solution: Digital Navigator Corps Partnership

Cook County and its partners will participate in and support a corps of Digital Navigators focused on digital skills learning, tech support, and internet safety and security, currently being led by the State. Digital Navigators will provide high-quality one-on-one support and assistance to community members and to lead classes and workshops on topics of interest. For example, Digital Navigators may be specifically focused on supporting young people, seniors, or non-English speakers.

IMPACT Solution: Supporting the Workforce of the Future

In order to support the Workforce of the Future, Cook County can support opportunities for digital upskilling and create partnerships that encourage pathways to good tech-related jobs. Opportunities may include pilot programs to teach cutting-edge digital skills for work, such as software as a service, network administration, artificial intelligence, robotics, and mixed reality. Plus, Cook County can partner with workforce development organizations to encourage and provide paid internships, externships, and apprenticeships for participants from digital equity programs to gain work experience and pathways to employment.

IMPACT Solution: Build the Learning Ecosystem

Cook County will take a community-by-community approach to grow the digital equity learning ecosystem. This starts with developing an asset map that includes people, places, and spaces that advance digital equity at the community level. From there, Cook County will facilitate and provide technical assistance to cities, coalitions, and nonprofits as they develop digital equity micro-plans. Micro-plans may be used to identify and support both new and existing digital skill providers to address the digital skill needs and interests of each community.

Cook County will also support and grow the ecosystem within County government by identifying all digital equity related projects within County departments and assessing them for alignment with this plan and best practices. The County will continue to work with its Bureau of Human Resources and Bureau of Technology on digital skill trainings and programming for County employees.

"Use **trusted members** of the community to provide basic training to new users."

– Community member

Image credit: Circle Root Collaborative

"More technicians and labs, solving IT issues, and **a plan for the future** – workforce development and certification programs."

– Community member

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Activity for Confidence Conversations

Confidence deeply affects what we feel comfortable doing online–for example, accessing health care, banking, or applying for jobs. Feeling uncertain about how to get everyday things done online can even lead to people not engaging with tech tools at all. Confidence is a feeling that grows when people feel supported, discuss their concerns openly without shame, and find solutions through trusted resources. Confidence grows when resources are accessible, meeting people where they are and reducing the feeling of anxiety and overwhelm while increasing feelings of comfort and capability. The following list of topics is intended to help you facilitate discussions in your community about digital confidence. Set up a meeting in a comfortable, private, yet accessible space and listen to each other. This activity can generate lots of ideas for the digital equity providers in your area and across Cook County.

HEALTH

- How do you feel about inputting your personal health information into web-based forms?

- Do you feel supported when you must use digital tools in medical spaces? For example: making the appointment online, using a sign-in kiosk, paying a co-pay online, or signing digital forms.

- Do you feel that your provider gives you the same level of care through digital or "telehealth" appointments as in-person appointments?

- Do you feel comfortable using video chat?

- How do you access health information that you trust online?

WORK

- When applying for a new job, are you worried your level of digital confidence could impact your eligibility for the role?

- Does your workplace offer any digital training? If so, do you think these training courses are good enough?

- Do you think remote work is beneficial? To whom?

- Are you comfortable putting together a resume on a computer? How about applying for jobs through online portals?

FINANCIAL SERVICES

- Do you have a bank account that you can access through the internet? Why or why not?

- Are you ever worried about using your credit card or bank information to make online purchases?

- How do you feel when you make an online purchase, and then you start to receive marketing emails from the seller?

- Do you feel like you can trust online tax filing services?
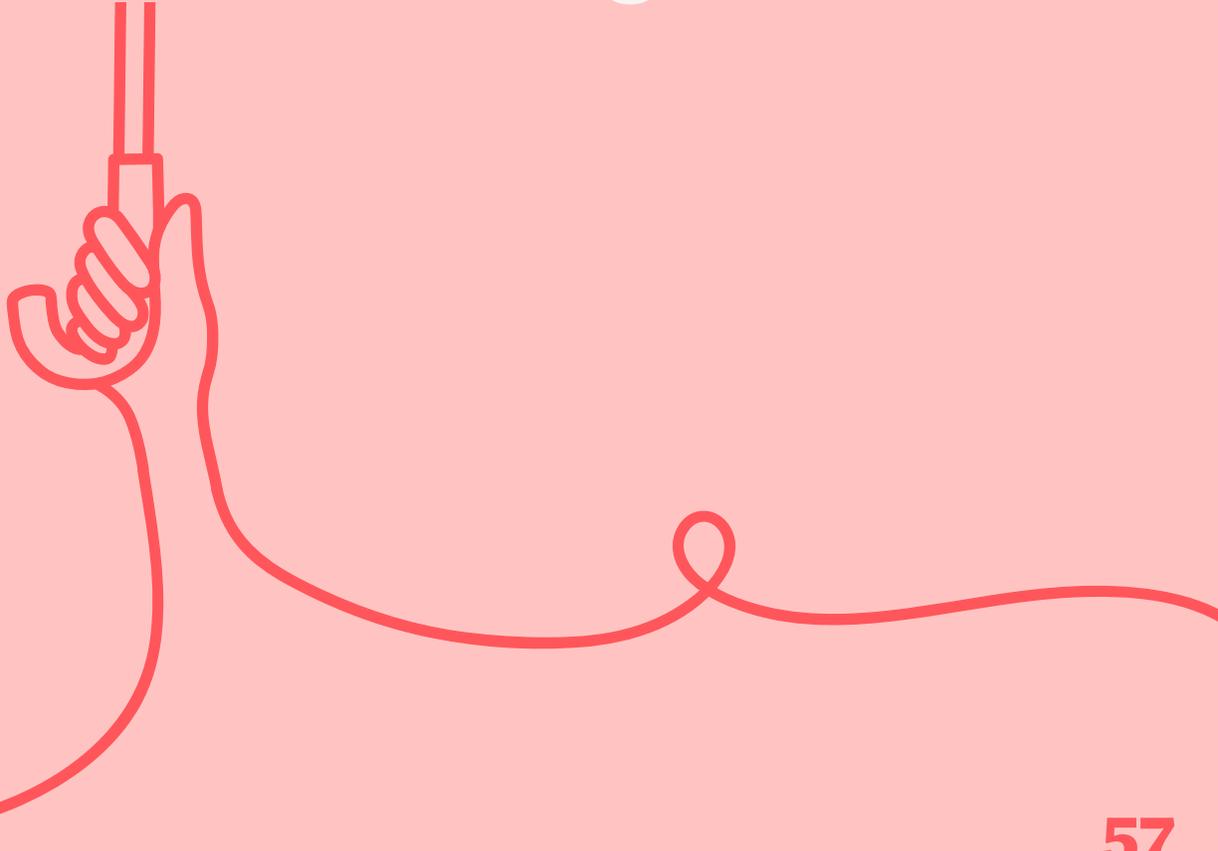
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

- Have you ever used online tools to communicate about things happening in your community? Did it reach the people you needed to?

- Do you look for election information online? Do you participate in the census? Why or why not?

- Do you think about what online sources you look at could be "fake news" or biased? Do you know how to tell if it is misinformation?

- How do you think increasing digital confidence will affect people's willingness to advocate for issues they care about?
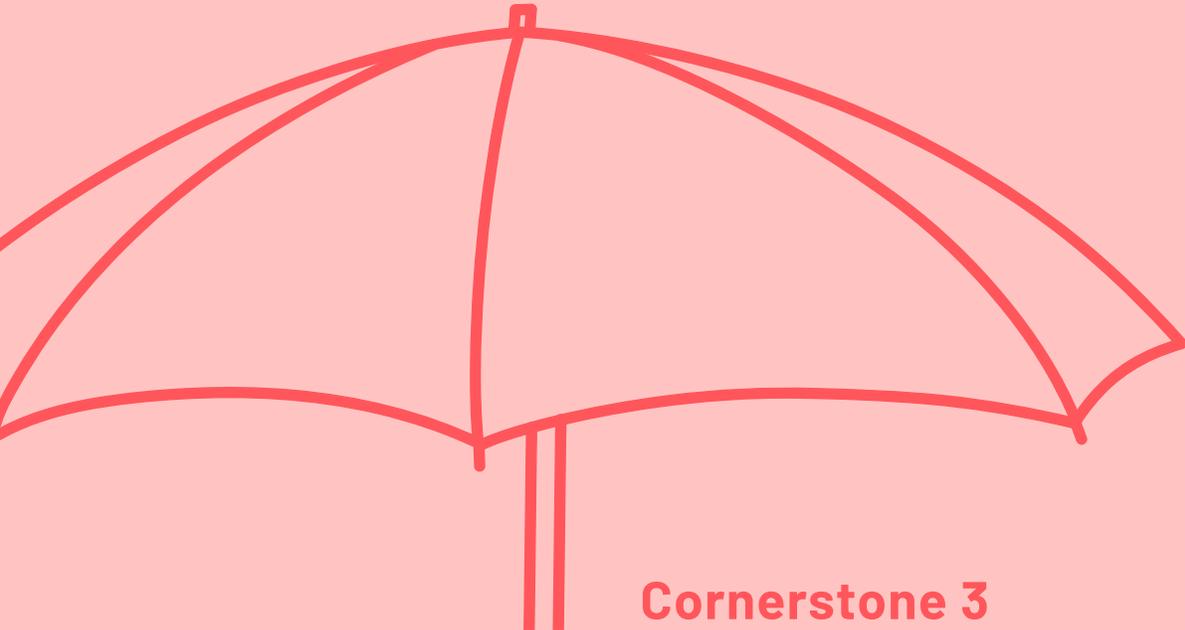
Cornerstone 3

Safety

The digital equity public engagement process showed that many community members are concerned about their safety and security when interacting with technology – and about the safety of their families and communities.

These worries are real: we or our loved ones have all experienced risks and dangers like extraction or theft of money and data; mental health risks for kids using social media and for anyone exposed to online hate or harassment; spending too much time online; and a loss of control and consent over how our information is used.

People from historically marginalized communities in particular face more risks as companies and even governments use data and algorithms used to profile, track, and over-police communities or harm chances at opportunities like jobs or loans. (White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, 2022).

It doesn't matter how much infrastructure we build, how many programs we develop – if we are not helping people stay safe online, we're failing to deliver on digital equity. Virtually all of us, and so many of our friends, family, and neighbors, have experienced risks and harms. Many people who could be leaders and collaborators in digital spaces feel suspicious and refuse to even participate in the digital world.

SO HOW DO WE BUILD ON THE POSITIVE POTENTIAL OF TECHNOLOGY, WHILE ACKNOWLEDGING AND ADDRESSING THE DOWNSIDES?

Our vision: build knowledge and power among Cook County residents to create a collective culture of consent and safety in all technological interactions. This means helping each other understand and address risks, for both individuals and for our communities – and

making digital safety a priority for Cook County's partners and for all institutions involved in providing digital equity services. It also means building shared strategies, practices, and standards that people can bring back to their friends, neighbors, and loved ones. And providing extra support, particularly for those who feel overwhelmed due to their own lived experiences or identities.

With the Safety cornerstone, Cook County will provide resources for how people can protect themselves when interacting in digital spaces, create community conversations and agreements around protecting ourselves and each other, and advocate for accountability.

WE WILL KNOW WE HAVE ACHIEVED SAFETY AND SECURITY WHEN...

residents have freely available technical support resources (including non-English speaking populations); when people come together to build networks of support to advocate and to organize around community digital health and safety; when those who already provide safety services to vulnerable communities are able to provide digital safety services; and when people have access to technology expertise to answer their questions and advise.

WHAT WE LEARNED:

We learned that online security and privacy concerns are paramount. Nearly three-quarters of survey respondents reported being concerned or very concerned about identity theft or online privacy. This concern was also strongly present across Community Conversations, with many respondents citing these concerns as one of the barriers to fully taking advantage of digital access.

Further, we learned that residents worry that spending too much time online might result in cyber bullying, identity theft, loss of privacy, weakened social connections, and online addiction. While there are known dangers to being online, Cook County hopes that additional support and workshops on digital safety will help residents feel confident about how to protect themselves and their loved ones from online threats.

"How does your access to the internet affect your life in the following areas?"

Of respondents with home internet, 63% report that internet access has a "positive" or "very positive" effect on their career. In comparison, respondents without home internet report a 40% "positive" or "very positive" effect. Conversely, of respondents without home internet, 30% report that their level of internet access has a "negative" or "very negative" effect on their career. Respondents with home internet report a 13% "negative" or "very negative" effect.

Effects of the Internet | Impacts
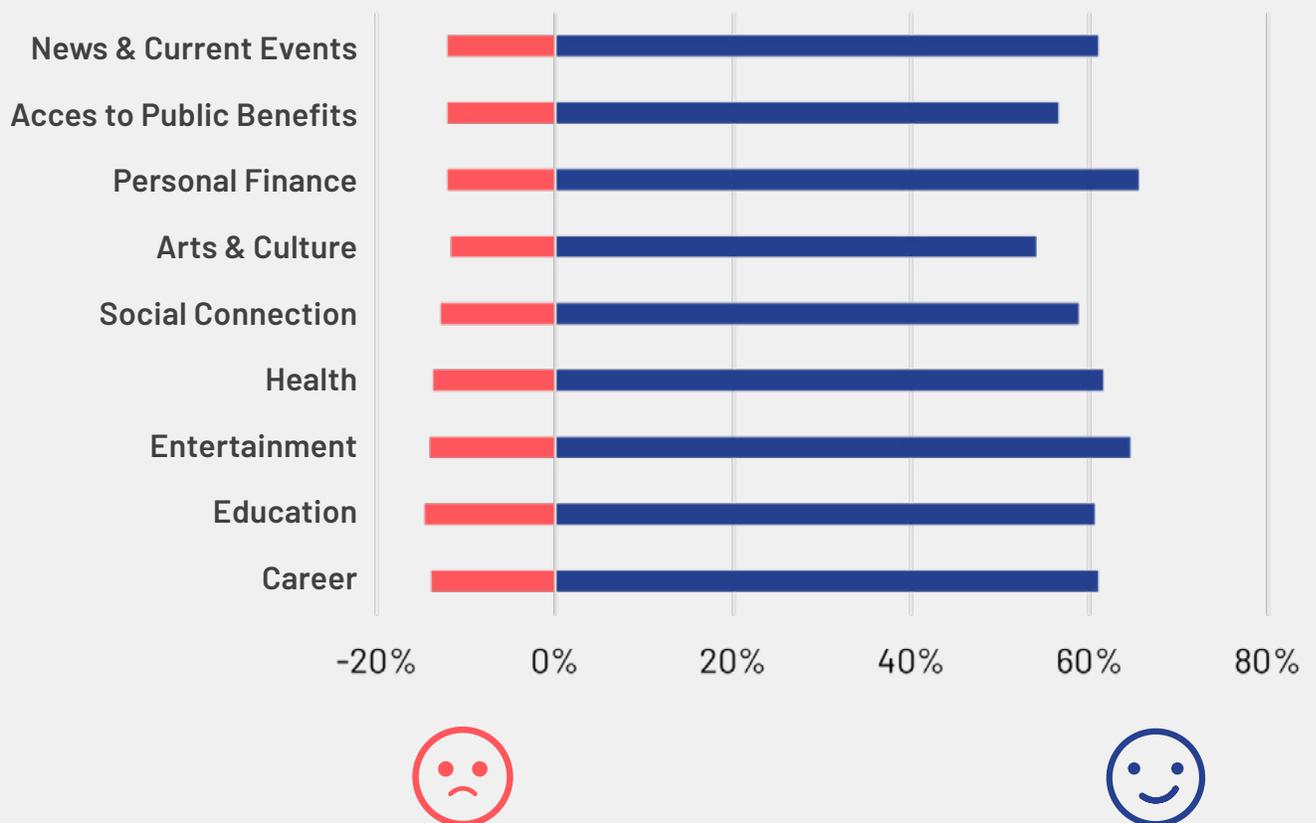
WHEN ASKED TO IDENTIFY "CONCERNS REGARDING THE TIME YOU OR YOUR HOUSEHOLD SPEND ONLINE,

74% of all respondents report being "concerned" or "very concerned" about identity theft. Also, 74% report being "concerned" or "very concerned" about online privacy, and 52% report being "concerned" or "very concerned" about cyberbullying. Addressing these concerns will require a combination of training, advocacy, and community support to protect residents from these threats–and to create pathways to advocate and build towards a better internet and improved online culture. 74% of all respondents report being "concerned" or "very concerned" about identity theft.

We'll know when Safety and Security is achieved when community members feel empowered to protect themselves, each other, and their communities against online threats, and we see individuals and communities most affected by risk feel safe enough to access and use the internet in their lives. Individuals and groups will express that they have the tools they need to learn and share online safety strategies that fit their unique needs.
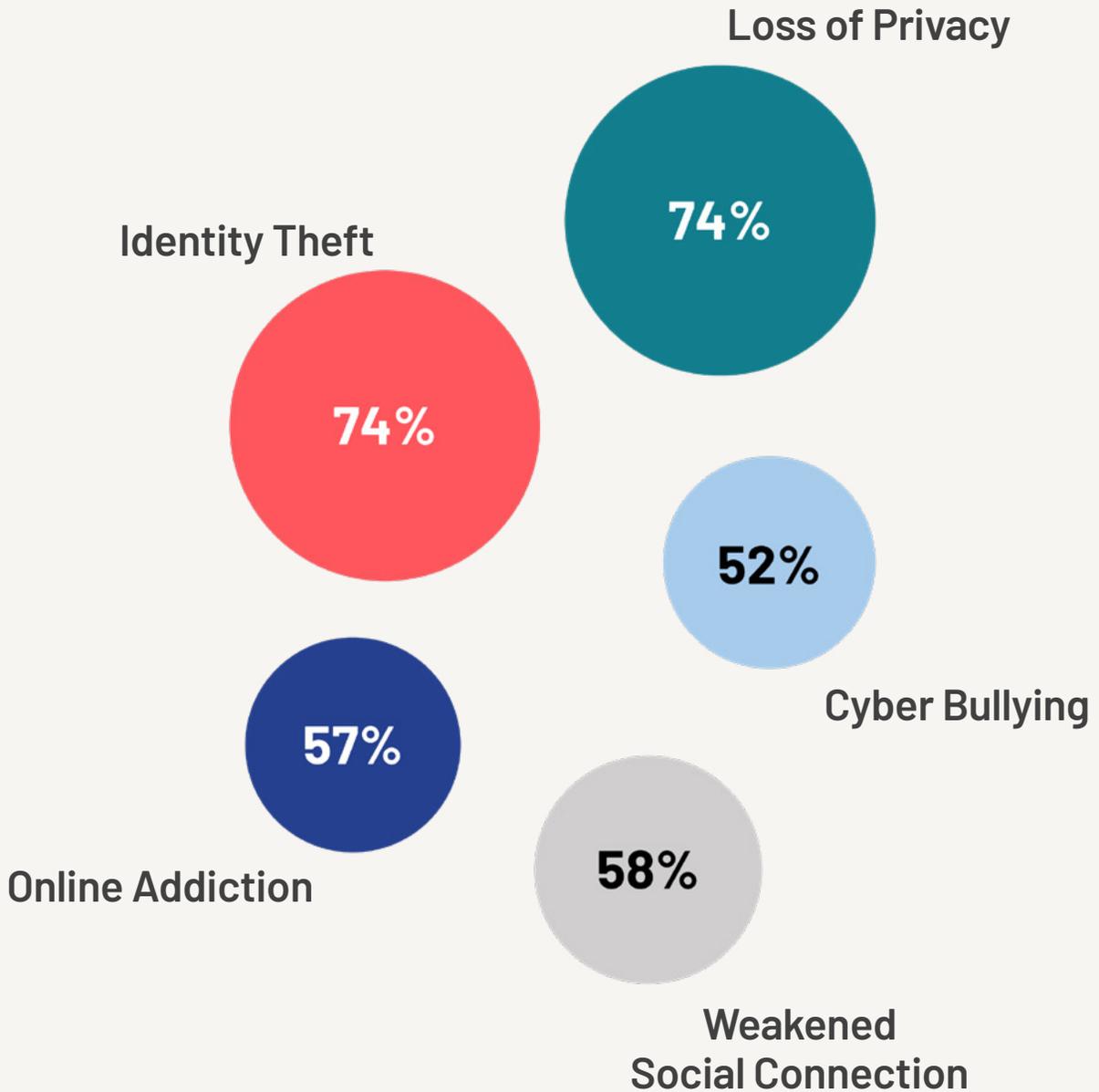
74%

of all respondents report being "concerned" or "very concerned" about identity theft.

Image credit: Circle Root Collective

Percent of Survey Respondents with Concerns Over Time Spent Online

Loss of Privacy

74%

Identity Theft

74%

52%

Cyber Bullying

57%

Online Addiction
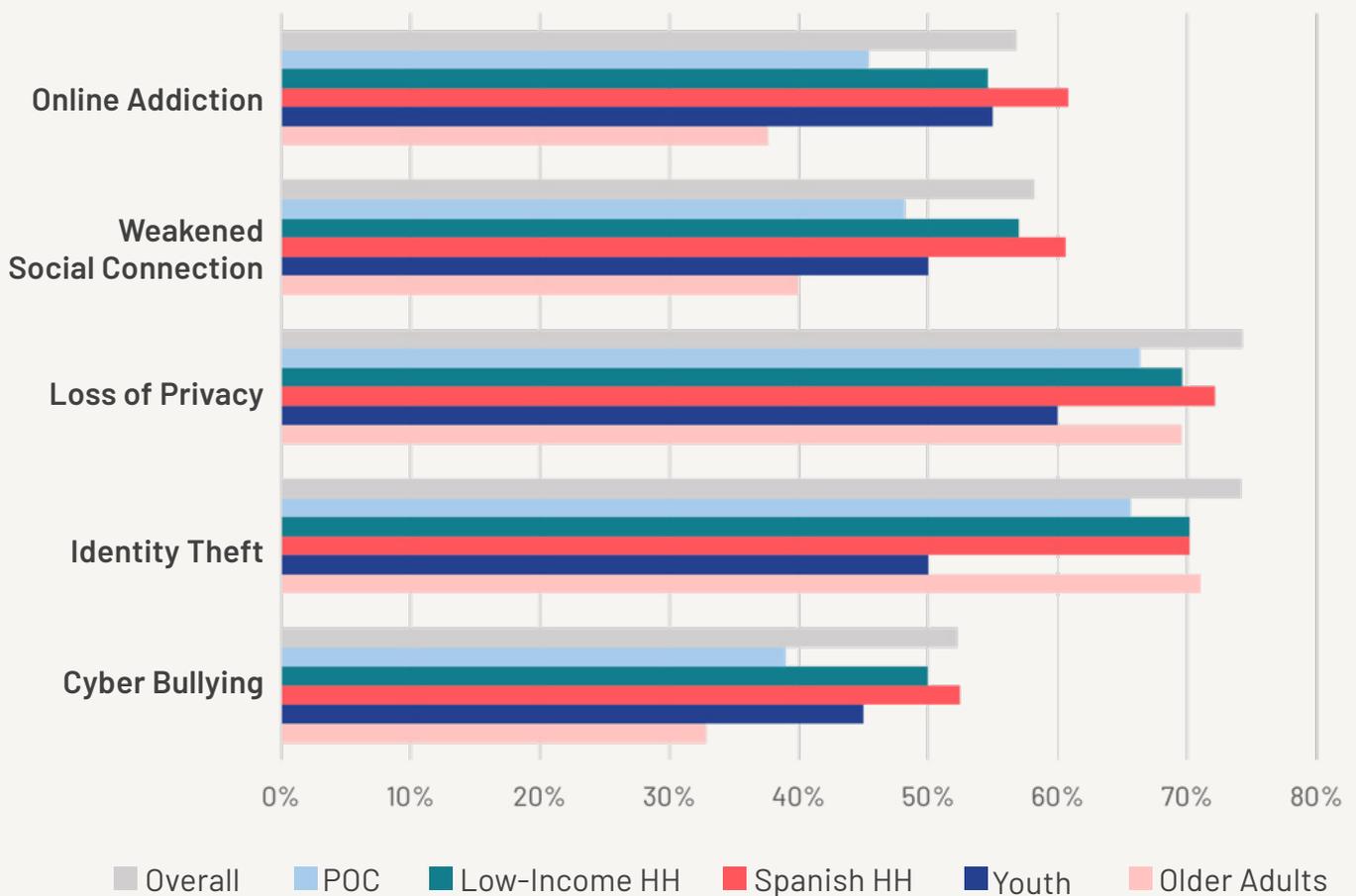
58%

**Weakened
Social Connection**

IMPACT Solution: Digital Safety Help Line Operated by Community Helpdesks

Cook County plans to bring partners and social service providers together in order to explore a Digital Safety Help Line model, which could be staffed by Digital Navigator programs. Partnerships can also be formed with entities who work with specific at-risk populations, including refugees, youth, unhoused, and domestic violence survivors so that the Helpline is equipped to support the diverse needs of the community.

Concerns Over Time Spent Online

Legend: Overall, POC, Low-Income HH, Spanish HH, Youth, Older Adults

Categories: Online Addiction, Weakened Social Connection, Loss of Privacy, Identity Theft, Cyber Bullying

IMPACT Solution: Safety and Security Awareness

Cook County will work to provide expertise and information to the public, through skill-building opportunities, communications, or campaigns, about safety and security. That information may include:

- Protecting ourselves, protecting each other: talking about safety concerns and strategies

- Understanding and stopping the spread of mis- and disinformation

- What's in my wallet: Understanding the data we share in financial transactions

- Protecting our mental health and managing tech-related trauma, including online racism and violence

IMPACT Solution: Digital Safety Threat Communications

Cook County will increase communications about digital safety and specific threats to its residents, including phishing schemes, online scams, and consumer advisories that can be amplified from the Federal Communications Commission. Cook County can also share tips for mitigating and reporting online threats as well as concrete steps to take to address threats.

Image credit: Circle Root Collective
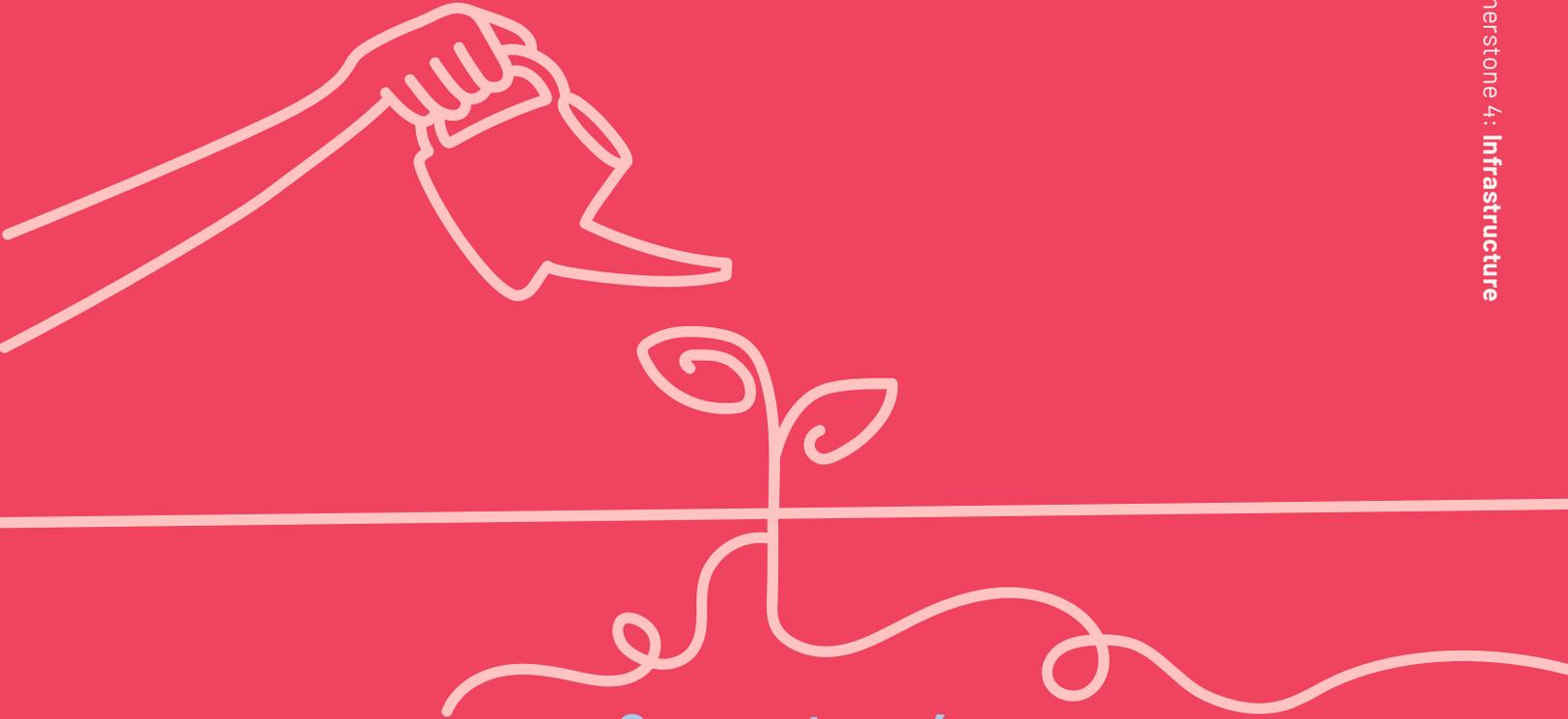
Cornerstone 4

Infrastructure

Digital Infrastructure refers to the hardware, systems, and tools involved in the delivery of high-speed (or "broadband") internet, including fiberoptic and cable lines, towers, and exchange points.
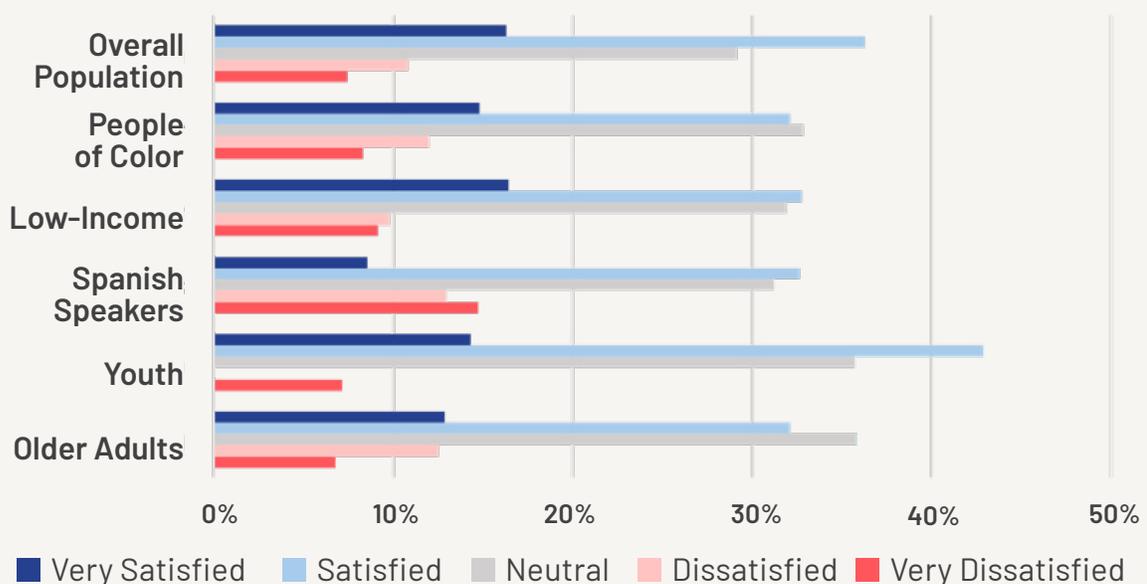
The type of infrastructure built, where it's built, and the quality of service it offers directly affects how people connect and what they can do online. The vision for this cornerstone is that the digital infrastructure in Cook County and its partners provide internet services that meet the needs of the community—in other words, that fast, reliable internet service is available to all.
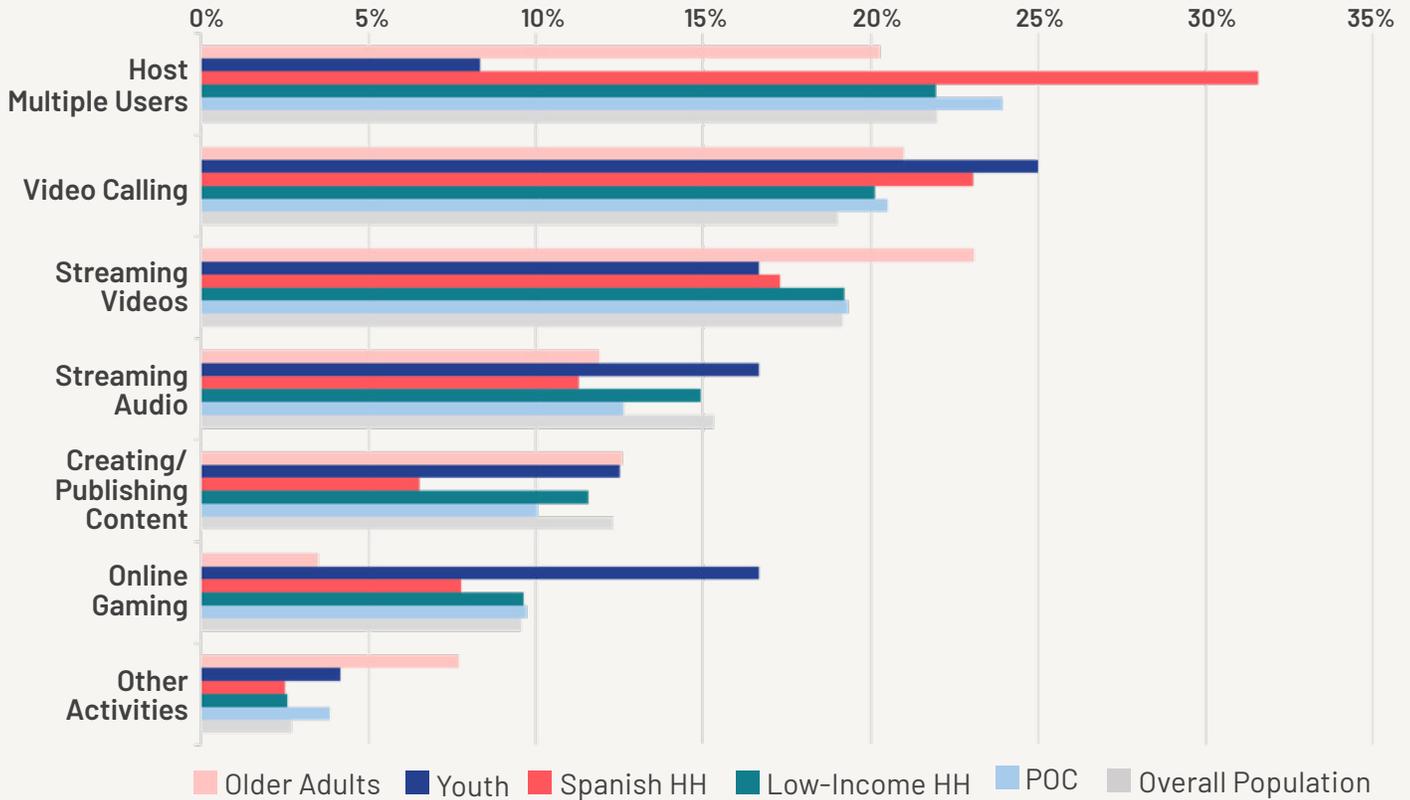
PERFORMANCE AND RELIABILITY

Today, the internet service that is available in suburban Cook County doesn't meet the needs of all residents. We heard reports of slow speeds, unreliable connections, and a lack of bandwidth to support multiple users in a household. Of those surveyed who had home internet access, almost a fifth reported that they were "dissatisfied" or "very dissatis-fied" with their service. Additionally, half said that their connection keeps them from doing things they want to do online. Without access to internet services that are robust and reliable, suburban Cook County residents aren't able take full advantage of all the internet has to offer.

Satisfaction with Internet Quality

Legend: Very Satisfied, Satisfied, Neutral, Dissatisfied, Very Dissatisfied

Limitations of Home Internet

Chart legend: Older Adults, Youth, Spanish HH, Low-Income HH, POC, Overall Population

Categories (top to bottom):
- Host Multiple Users
- Video Calling
- Streaming Videos
- Streaming Audio
- Creating/Publishing Content
- Online Gaming
- Other Activities

People have trouble with online activities due to limitations on, or quality of, their internet connections. The above chart shows the percentage of each survey group that described difficulties in each category of online activity.

Based on our survey data, many people reported that their home internet doesn't work well when multiple people are using it at once. This is critically important to creating more equity for all households. Some households that do not have adequate service are forced to decide between having a child attending online school and a parent working virtually on the same network. Cook County residents should never have to make this choice.

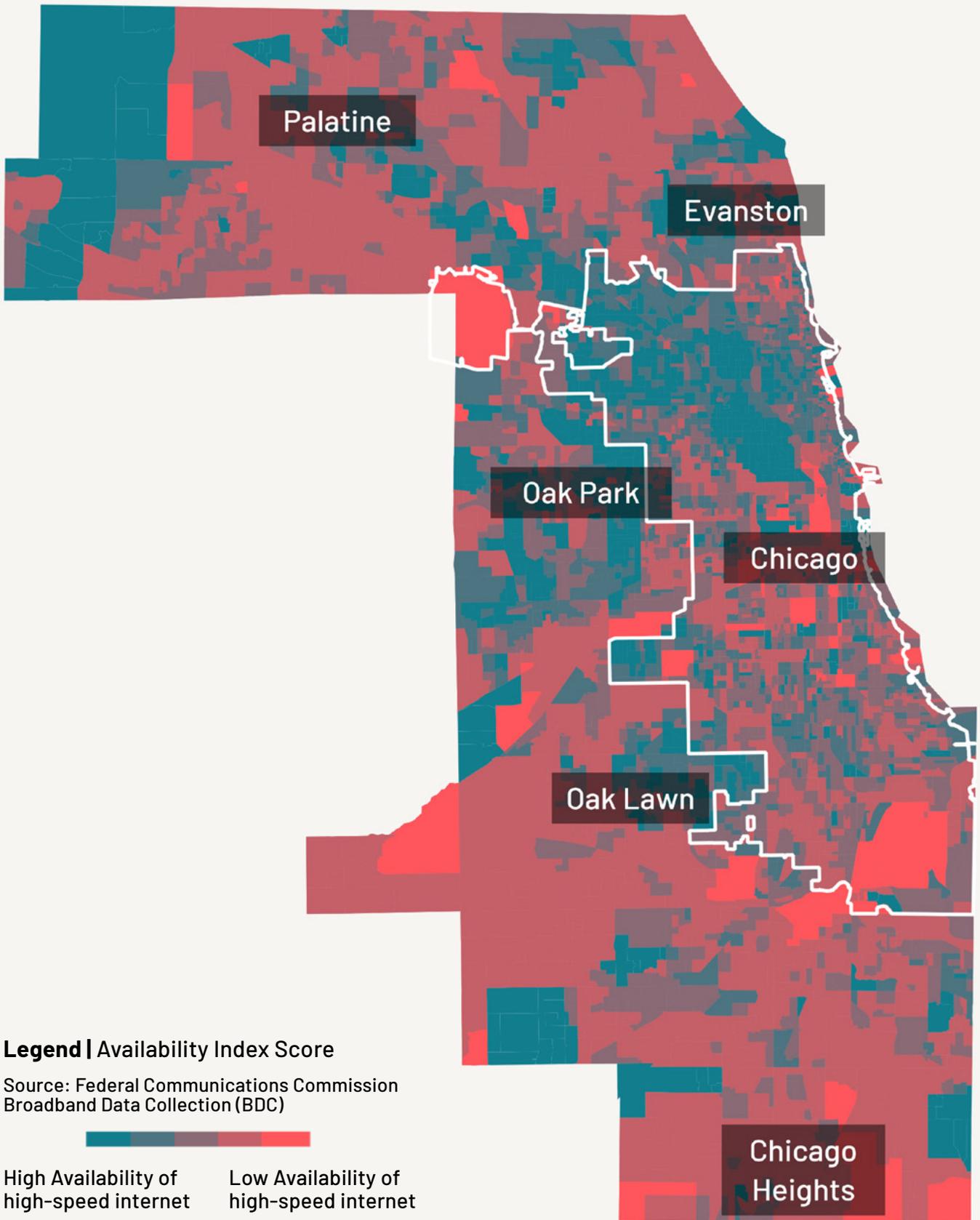## COMMUNITY CONVERSATION PARTICIPANTS TOLD US:

"No high-quality service available"

"Bandwidth [isn't] able to handle multiple devices"

"Slow access—goes out just because"

67

Internet Availability Takeaways

The availability of robust internet service in all parts of Cook County is essential for building digital equity. But today, **not all areas of Cook County have the same options for high-quality internet.**

This map uses several factors, including the internet speeds and types of technologies (fiber optic, cable, or copper wire) available at different locations, to identify the parts of Cook County that have greater need for more broadband infrastructure investment. Red areas indicate higher need.

Legend | Availability Index Score

Source: Federal Communications Commission
Broadband Data Collection (BDC)

High Availability of   Low Availability of
high-speed internet   high-speed internet

The availability index visualizes gaps in the availability of high-quality internet across Cook
County. As an index, this metric factors in the percentage of unserved locations, underserved
locations, and locations with poor cable, fiber, or copper service. Red areas indicate higher
needs related to broadband availability.

INFRASTRUCTURE AVAILABILITY

For others in Cook County, internet access isn't available at all. Three percent of survey respondents reported that they don't have home internet because it isn't available in their area. Areas of the south and west suburbs, as well as parts of the south and west sides of Chicago, lack the underlying infrastructure for residents to access high-speed internet. It's not just that some residents in these 'broadband deserts' can't afford high-speed internet – it's not available at their home at any price.

The data on these maps may also be understating the issue. Many areas may have less robust internet services available than what is shown in publicly available data.

WE KNOW EXPANDED INFRASTRUCTURE WILL BE ACHIEVED WHEN...

every resident has access to high-speed home internet. Our Digital Infrastructure vision will be achieved by leveraging County-owned infrastructure and other assets to incentivize investment in new broadband infrastructure by providers and investors.

"Some areas are not serviced by any provider"

– Community member

IMPACT Solution: Create a Plan to Improve and Strategically Expand Infrastructure

Cook County recently completed the first phase of its current broadband expansion efforts, which connect several municipal anchor institutions in this region to high-speed broadband, including the Palos Heights Police Department, Tinley Park Public Works, Moraine Valley Community College, Thornton School District 154 and others (Cook County, 2023). Cook County can leverage its own infrastructure to attract new partners for last-mile access, and to support the Chicago Southland Fiber Network and HACC Broadband Expansion projects (Tate, 2023). Cook County is evaluating public-private-partnership ideas to leverage this infrastructure to provide service to residents. For example, Cook County can make its network open access to allow local internet providers to use or allow partners to build community Wi-Fi using existing infrastructure.

To identify innovative ways to expand the network, Cook County and its partners will work to: conduct market sounding with broadband providers to see how they can leverage the infrastructure to provide residential access; connect additional anchor institutions; and research funding programs and connect with state officials about forthcoming opportunities.

Cook County and its partners can also crowdsource examples of innovative projects across Cook County or elsewhere that could be replicated or expanded, and develop technical assistance resources for communities seeking solutions.

IMPACT Solution: Infrastructure Asset Mapping

Many locations in Cook County are shown as "served" on all provider data submitted to the Federal Communications Commission, but that is often not people's experience. Poor performance is common in areas where internet providers have not upgraded infrastructure or have stopped maintaining legacy infrastructure like copper digital subscriber lines (DSL). Mapping efforts are underway to try to resolve this data inconsistency, both at the local and state level, and nationally as part of the mandate of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021. This process is iterative and relies on careful data collection and refinement to provide the clearest picture of infrastructure availability possible. As Cook County maps our local infrastructure, it will interact and contribute to other mapping efforts to validate findings. The County and its partners may also consider running a local public challenge process where residents can report their internet conditions to further refine and validate data provided by internet providers.

As part of this effort, Cook County and its partners will work with municipal governments and school districts to take stock of assets like buildings, poles, and conduit that can be potentially used for expanding broadband infrastructure; align with state and city efforts; and leverage a public map challenge process to understand pockets of need and poor service, and to check available maps and data for accuracy.

IMPACT Solution: Advocate for Accountability for Service Providers on Price and Performance

Community Conversation participants asked for public agencies to take a more active oversight role in improving infrastructure in underserved areas, addressing poor service due to a lack of competition, and ensuring that plans offered under internet affordability programs are of high quality. The County can advocate with other government stakeholders and the industry in order to encourage accountability for pricing and service commitments, including meeting established standards for service and privacy.

Cook County and its partners will also invest in the ecosystem described in this plan to educate residents about service providers and broadband systems.

Roadmap to Digital Equity

With this plan in place, Cook County is committing to bringing together partners and leading the way on tangible changes people can see and feel as they engage with digital resources. We're excited for residents to start seeing changes like new resources, devices, and infrastructure in their communities.

PUTTING THE PLAN IN MOTION

In the spirit of IMPACT, Cook County is looking to implement the actions in this plan right away. We will collect your feedback and begin to evaluate funding opportunities in late fall 2023. We want to hear from you! Please look for community feedback opportunities.

ONGOING ENGAGEMENT WITH OUR COMMUNITIES

Cook County believes that community engagement is integral to everyday work for achieving digital equity. Cook County's Guiding Team and its CODE advisory group will continue to shape opportunities presented in this Plan and will seek partnerships across the region. Cook County commits to building the digital equity ecosystem from the foundation of the summer 2023 engagement and this plan. We will create ongoing feedback loops with stakeholder groups we've engaged, add additional groups that should be engaged, and seek feedback from all residents on the shape of this collaboration.

REACH OUT – COOK COUNTY WANTS TO HEAR FROM YOU!

Throughout this plan, we have included activities and worksheets that Cook County residents can use to get conversations started in your communities. Please **share your feedback** on this plan and your ideas for advancing digital equity in Cook County here.

Digital Equity Solution Tree Activity

We can think of the partnerships between Cook County, stakeholders and community members as roots that ground our collective work towards digital equity, ensuring everyone has equal economic, political and social opportunities and rights. This exercise gives us a chance to analyze the foundational partnerships that will grow digital equity in Cook County, and to build off the digital equity branches by identifying new "leaves" or actions that everyone can take to contribute. The tree provides a visual structure for the analysis. This activity is best handled in small groups so that each person in the group can participate; and should take around 30-60 minutes, depending on the depth of discussion that follows.
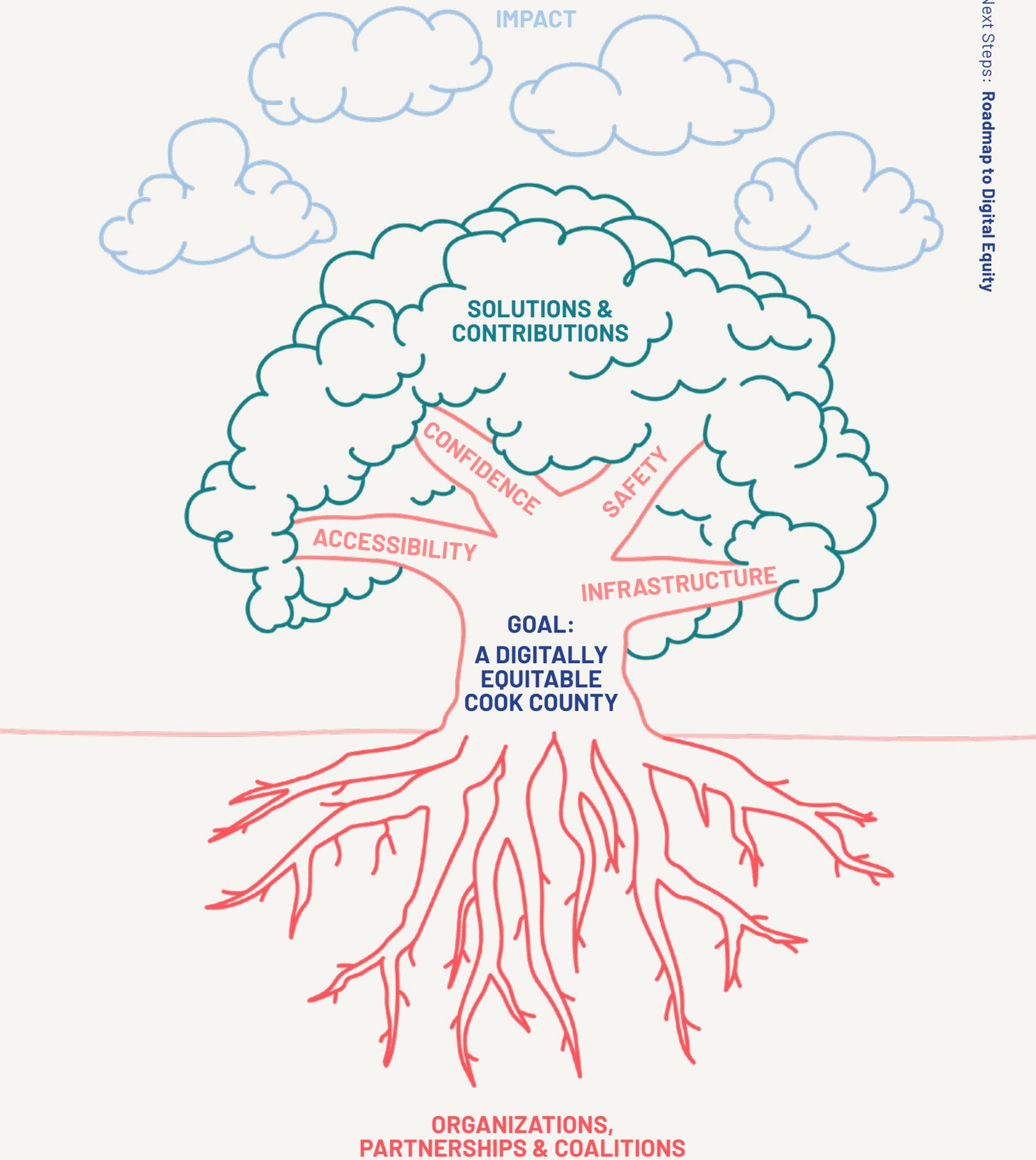
Activity Instructions for Facilitators:

1. Introduce the activity and explain the problem tree and what the parts of the tree represent:

    a. Roots = organizations, partnerships, and coalitions that are the foundation for change

    b. Trunk = the goal: A digitally equitable Cook County

    c. Branches = the Cornerstones of digital equity outlined in this plan

    d. Leaves = solutions and contributions that expand or enhance the IMPACT solutions presented in this plan

    e. Clouds = impact we want to achieve

2. Discuss the goal of digital equity, the collaboratives that will support solutions, and the digital equity cornerstones presented in this plan. After covering the main concepts, give participants approximately 20 minutes to expand or add new solution leaves to the tree. Encourage people to explore solutions that consider social, economic and political barriers including attitudes, behavior, and other factors.

Give participants the opportunity to share and discuss their solution trees as a group.
Ask: what solutions feel the most relevant and impactful?

Now explore solutions more deeply—ask the group to list what the hoped-for impact would be and write them in the clouds. In other words, once these solutions are in place, what does successful digital equity mean for Cook County residents?

IMPACT

SOLUTIONS & CONTRIBUTIONS

CONFIDENCE

SAFETY

ACCESSIBILITY

INFRASTRUCTURE

GOAL:
A DIGITALLY
EQUITABLE
COOK COUNTY

ORGANIZATIONS,
PARTNERSHIPS & COALITIONS

Appendix

APPENDIX 1: SUBURBAN ENGAGEMENT PRIORITY AREAS

Alsip/ Merrionette Park

Blue Island

Bridgeview

Burnham

Chicago Heights/ Ford Heights/ Lynwood/ Sauk Village/ Steger

Chicago Ridge

Cicero

Elk Grove Village

Evanston

Harvey/ Dixmoor/ Phoenix

Hazel Crest/ East Hazel Crest

Hometown

Justice

La Grange/ Countryside/ Hodgkins/ Indian Head

Park/ McCook

Markham

Maywood

Melrose Park

Melrose Park/ Northlake

Palatine

Palatine (Inverness)

Posen

Riverdale/

Calumet Park

Robbins

Schiller Park

Stone Park

Summit Argo

Thornton

University Park

Wheeling

APPENDIX 2: GUIDING TEAM MEMBERS

NAME	TITLE	ORGANIZATION	COMMUNITY AREA
Denise Barreto	Former Director of Equity and Inclusion	Cook County Government	Cook County
Kimberly Harris	Director/School Librarian	William Leonard Public Library District/WHSD 147	Robbins & Dixmoor
Lazaro Lopez	Interim Superintendent	High School District 214	Wheeling, Elk Grove, Palatine
Tony Schlorff	Director of Technology	High School District 214	Wheeling, Elk Grove, Palatine
Tracy Sylvester	Senior Services Director	Bloom Township	Chicago Heights
Vince Jones	Director of Technology & Communications	Thornton Township High School District 205	Thornton
Agneis "Neisy" Schultz	Vice President, Community Innovation and Impact	YMCA	Countywide
Alisha Clark	Executive Director, Workforce Development and Community Education	Prairie State College	Chicago Heights
Caroline Crozier	Director of Latinxdln	Latinxdln	Countywide
Dwayne Douglas	CEO	The QUILT Corp NFP	Naperville
Esteban Rodriguez	Executive DIrector	Corazón Community Services	Cicero
Jamie Dornfeld	Executive Vice President	Aunt Martha's Health & Wellness	Chicago Heights
Rodney Harrington	Founder	River Oaks Community Education and Development Corporation	Thornton Township
Sonya Harrington	Library Trustee/Founder/ Director	South Holland Library/ ROCED	Thornton Township

APPENDIX 3: REFERENCES

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APPENDIX 4: SURVEY QUESTIONS

Section 1: Internet Access

Please tell us more about how you and your household access the internet.

1. Do you have a home internet subscription? (Not including access through mobile phones/smartphones) ***IF No or I'm not sure is one of you answers skip to Section 1: Internet Access Question 7**
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ Not Sure

2. Who is your home internet Service Provider?
   - ☐ Astound (Formerly RCN)
   - ☐ AT&T
   - ☐ Comcast/Xfinity
   - ☐ Everywhere Wireless
   - ☐ HughesNet
   - ☐ Viasat
   - ☐ Windstream
   - ☐ WOW
   - ☐ I'm not sure
   - ☐ Other-Write In:

3. How satisfied are you with your home internet service?
   - ☐ Very Dissatisfied
   - ☐ Dissatisfied
   - ☐ Neutral
   - ☐ Satisfied
   - ☐ Very Satisfied

4. How much is your monthly home internet bill? (If you have a bundled cable and internet plan, please share only the cost of the Internet from your bill)
   - ☐ $0-$20
   - ☐ $21-$40
   - ☐ $41-$60
   - ☐ $61-$80
   - ☐ $81-$100
   - ☐ $101+
   - ☐ I'm not sure
   - ☐ Internet is included in my rent

5. What monthly home internet cost would you consider too expensive for your monthly budget?
   - ☐ $0-$20
   - ☐ $21-$30
   - ☐ $31-$40
   - ☐ $41-$50
   - ☐ $51-$60
   - ☐ $61-70
   - ☐ $71+
   - ☐ My internet is affordable
   - ☐ Internet should be free
   - ☐ I'm not sure

6. **What type of digital device(s) does your household use to access the internet at home? (check all that apply)**
   - ☐ Desktop Computer
   - ☐ Laptop Computer
   - ☐ Smartphone
   - ☐ Tablet or e-Reader
   - ☐ Smart Device (Smart TV, Home Security)
   - ☐ Gaming System
   - ☐ Wearable Device (i.e., Smartwatch)
   - ☐ I don't use any devices to access the internet at home
   - ☐ Other – Write In:

7. **Why do you not have a home internet subscription? (check all that apply)**
   - ☐ I access the internet via my smartphone
   - ☐ I don't have a desktop computer or laptop to access the internet
   - ☐ I access the internet outside of my home
   - ☐ I don't need the internet
   - ☐ I don't know how to use the internet
   - ☐ I have privacy and security concerns about using the internet
   - ☐ A home internet subscription is too expensive
   - ☐ The internet is not available in my area
   - ☐ Other – Write In:
   - ☐ The internet service is unreliable in my area

8. **Where do you access the internet when not at home? Please select all that apply.**
   - ☐ I use my smartphone data plan
   - ☐ Workplace
   - ☐ Library
   - ☐ School
   - ☐ Community Center
   - ☐ Public parks
   - ☐ Private businesses (ex. coffee shops, malls, hotels, etc.)
   - ☐ Homes of friends or relatives
   - ☐ I do not access the internet outside of my home
   - ☐ Other writing In:

9. **(Optional) What else should we know about how you or your household access the internet?**

Section 2: Internet Impact

Please answer the questions below to help us better understand the ways in which internet access, at home or elsewhere, affects your quality of life

10. How does your access to the internet affect your life in the following areas?
Please put an **X** in the box that applies to each topic.

	VERY NEGATIVELY	NEGATIVELY	NO EFFECT	POSITIVELY	VERY POSITIVELY
Career (ex. job search, remote work, training, etc.)					
Education (ex. online classes, homework assistance, research, etc.)					
Entertainment (ex. streaming music and movies, gaming, online videos, etc.)					
Health (ex. virtual appointments, prescription management, online health records, etc.)					
Social Connection (ex. social media, online dating, facetime, etc.) prescription management, online health records, etc.)					
Arts & Culture (ex. Virtual museums, online libraries, creative arts, etc.)					
Personal Finance (ex. shopping, banking, managing utilities, etc.)					
Access to Public Benefits (ex. Social Security, SNAP, Unemployment, etc.)					
News & Current Events (ex. articles, podcasts, news reports, etc.)					
Write in:					

11. Do you have any concerns regarding the time you or your household spend online? Please put an **X** in the box that applies.

	NOT AT ALL CONCERNED	CONCERNED	VERY CONCERNED
Cyberbullying			
Identity Theft			
Loss of Privacy			
Weakened Social			
Connection			
Online or Technology			
Addiction			
Write in:			

12. Are there any activities that you have to do in person that you wish were easier to do online?
    ☐ Employment Opportunities
    ☐ Social Services/ Benefits
    ☐ Banking
    ☐ Utilities
    ☐ Other - Write In:
    ☐ None

13. (Optional) What else should we know about the ways that internet access affects you or your household's life?

Section 3: Barriers to Access

Please help us understand if there's anything you'd like to do online but can't due to the limitations of your internet connection or your own skills and knowledge.

14. Is there anything you want to do online that your home internet connection won't allow?
    ☐ Host multiple users at once
    ☐ Video calls (ex. Facetime, Zoom, etc.)
    ☐ Streaming Video (ex. Netflix, YouTube, etc.)
    ☐ Streaming audio (ex. music, podcasts, etc.)
    ☐ Create and Publish Content (ex. Youtube channel, podcast, etc.)
    ☐ Online gaming
    ☐ Not applicable
    ☐ Other-Write In

15. Is there anything you want to do online that you don't know how or need help with?

☐ Video calls

☐ Streaming Video or Audio

☐ Online gaming

☐ Web Searches

☐ Email

☐ Use online apps

☐ Not applicable

☐ Other - Write In:

16. (Optional) What else should we know about any barriers you or your household face in getting online and using the internet?

Section 4: Tools for Access

Please help us understand the tools, programs, and places that could make a difference in ensuring widespread internet access across Cook County.

17. Have you heard of these programs that make it easier for households to get home internet service? (select all that apply)

☐ Free or discounted internet through an Internet Service Provider (Comcast's Internet Essentials, ATT's Access, etc.)

☐ Free or discounted internet through the federal government's Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)

☐ I have not heard of any of these programs

*IF No or I'm not sure is one of the following answers skip to **Section 4: Tools for Access Question 20**

18. Has your household signed up for any of the programs? (select all that apply)

☐ Yes, free or discounted Internet through an Internet Service Provider

☐ Yes, free or discounted Internet through the federal government's Affordable Connectivity Program

☐ (ACP)

☐ No, my household has not signed up for any of these programs

19. If you have heard of any of these programs, but have NOT signed up, why haven't you signed up for any of these programs?

☐ I tried to sign up but was told my household was not eligible

☐ I tried to sign up but language was a barrier

☐ I tried to sign up but it was too difficult

☐ I do not need financial assistance

☐ I did not try to sign up because I know my household is not eligible

☐ I did not try to sign up because I don't trust the program provider

☐ I did not try to sign up because I have an outstanding balance with the provider

☐ Other - Write In:

20. If there is someone living in your home between the ages of 5 and 18: Has your household participated in any programs that provided you with a free digital device for schoolwork?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ I'm not sure

☐ Not Applicable

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21. How interested are you in improving your skills in each of the following areas?
Please put an **X** in the box that applies.

	NOT INTERESTED	INTERESTED	VERY INTERESTED
Career (ex. job search, remote work, training, etc.)			
Education (ex. online classes, homework assistance, research, etc.)			
Entertainment (ex. streaming music and movies, gaming, online videos, etc.)			
Health (ex. virtual appointments, prescription management, online health records, etc.)			
Social Connection (ex. social media, online dating, facetime, etc.) prescription management, online health records, etc.)			
Arts & Culture (ex. Virtual museums, online libraries, creative arts, etc.)			
Personal Finance (ex. shopping, banking, managing utilities, etc.)			
News & Current Events (ex. articles, podcasts, news reports, etc.)			
Access to Public Benefits (ex. Social Security, SNAP, Unemployment, etc.)			
Write in:			

22. How likely would you be to reach out to the following groups for help with your computer, internet connection, or to learn a new digital skill? Please put an **X** in the box that applies.

	NOT LIKELY	LIKELY	VERY LIKELY
Public Library			
K-12			
College/University			
Community Organization			
Faith Based Organization			
Government Agency			
Internet Service Provider			
Wireless Carrier			
Employer			
Family Member			
Co-worker			
Write in:			

23. (Optional) What else should we know about the kinds of tools, programs, and places that could help Cook County residents better be able to use their internet and device(s)?

Section 5: Demographics

Finally, please tell us a bit about yourself.

24. What is your home zip code?

25. What is your age range?

- [ ] 13-17
- [ ] 18 - 24
- [ ] 25 - 34
- [ ] 35 - 44
- [ ] 45 - 54
- [ ] 55 - 64
- [ ] 65 - 74

26. How many people live in your household?

- [ ] 0
- [ ] 1
- [ ] 2
- [ ] 3
- [ ] 4
- [ ] 5
- [ ] 6
- [ ] 7
- [ ] 8
- [ ] 9
- [ ] 10
- [ ] 10+

27. How many people between the ages of 5 and 18 live in your household now?

- [ ] 0
- [ ] 1
- [ ] 2
- [ ] 3
- [ ] 4
- [ ] 5
- [ ] 6
- [ ] 7
- [ ] 8
- [ ] 9
- [ ] 10
- [ ] 10+

28. What race or ethnicity do you identify as? Please check all that apply.

- [ ] Asian
- [ ] Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- [ ] Black/African American
- [ ] Hispanic or Latinx/o/a
- [ ] American Indian/Alaska Native
- [ ] Multiracial
- [ ] White
- [ ] Prefer not to answer
- [ ] Other - Write In:

29. What gender do you identify as?

- [ ] Female
- [ ] Male
- [ ] Non-gender binary
- [ ] Prefer not to answer
- [ ] Other - Write In:

30. What is your primary language?

- [ ] English
- [ ] Spanish
- [ ] Cantonese
- [ ] Mandarin
- [ ] Polish
- [ ] Russian
- [ ] Arabic
- [ ] Tagalog
- [ ] Hindi
- [ ] Urdu
- [ ] Other - Write In:

31. What is the highest level of education you completed?

- [ ] Middle or Junior High School
- [ ] Some high school
- [ ] High School or GED
- [ ] Some College
- [ ] Vocational
- [ ] 2-year degree
- [ ] 4-year degree
- [ ] Graduate School
- [ ] Other - Write In:

32. What is the annual income of your household?

- [ ] Less than $20,000
- [ ] $20,000 to $34,999
- [ ] $35,000 to $49,999
- [ ] $50,000 to $74,999
- [ ] $75,000 to $99,999
- [ ] More than $100,000
- [ ] Prefer not to answer

33. How would you describe your current employment?

- [ ] Employed full-time
- [ ] Employed part-time
- [ ] Self-employed
- [ ] Not employed
- [ ] Other - Write In:

APPENDIX 5: DATA AND MAPPING METHODOLOGY STATEMENT

I. Mapping

Three indices inform the need for investment: the availability of high quality internet infrastructure, the affordability of high speed internet service, and other barriers to adoption. Each index, mapped above, is calculated by combining distinct factors from datasets from the FCC, ACS, and BroadbandNow.

1. **Availability:** This index is mapped at the block group level and is calculated by combining the below variables:

    a. Percent of unserved locations * 0.4 + Percent of underserved locations * 0.3 + Percent of locations served and underserved by Copper Wire * 0.1 + Percent unserved and underserved by Fiber * 0.1 + Percent unserved and underserved by Cable * 0.1

2. **Affordability:** This index is mapped at the census tract level and is calculated by combining the below variables:

    b. Percent of households above 200% Poverty * 0.5 + Percent of households classified as Housing Cost Burdened * 0.5

3. **Adoption:** This index is mapped at the census tract level and is calculated by combining the below variables:

    c. Percent of households with data plans only * 0.2 + Percent of households with No Computer * 0.2 + Percent of households with no internet access * 0.3 + Percent of households with dial-up or satellite subscriptions * 0.1 + Percent of households with computers without internet subscriptions * 0.1 + Percent of households with smartphones only * 0.1

II. Cross-Cuts

Circle Root's raw data was processed for finer-grained analysis of certain populations of suburban Cook County: aging individuals, youth, people of color, Spanish-speakers, and low-income individuals. These populations were chosen due to their alignment with previous Circle Root analyses and their relationship to NTIA's guidance on covered populations in digital equity work. The definitions used for each group are as follows:

- **Aging Individuals:** Survey respondents who answered the question "What is your age range?" with either "65 – 74" or "75 or above".

- **Youth:** Survey respondents who answered the question "What is your age range?" with "13 – 17".

- **Spanish-Speakers:** Survey respondents who answered the question "What is your primary language" with "Spanish".

- **Low-Income:** Survey respondents who answered the question "What is the annual income of your household?" and "How many people live in your household?" with the following responses:
    › An income of "Less than $20,000"
    › An income of "$20,000 to $34,999" and greater than 1 individual in the household
    › An income of "$35,000 to $49,999" and greater than 2 individuals in the household
    › An income of "$50,000 to $74,999" and greater than 4 individuals in the household
    › An income of "$75,000 to $99,999" and greater than 7 individuals in the household
    › An income of "More than $100,000" and greater than 10 individuals in the household

- **People of Color:** Survey respondents who answered the question "What race or ethnicity do you identify as? Please check all that apply." without selecting "White".
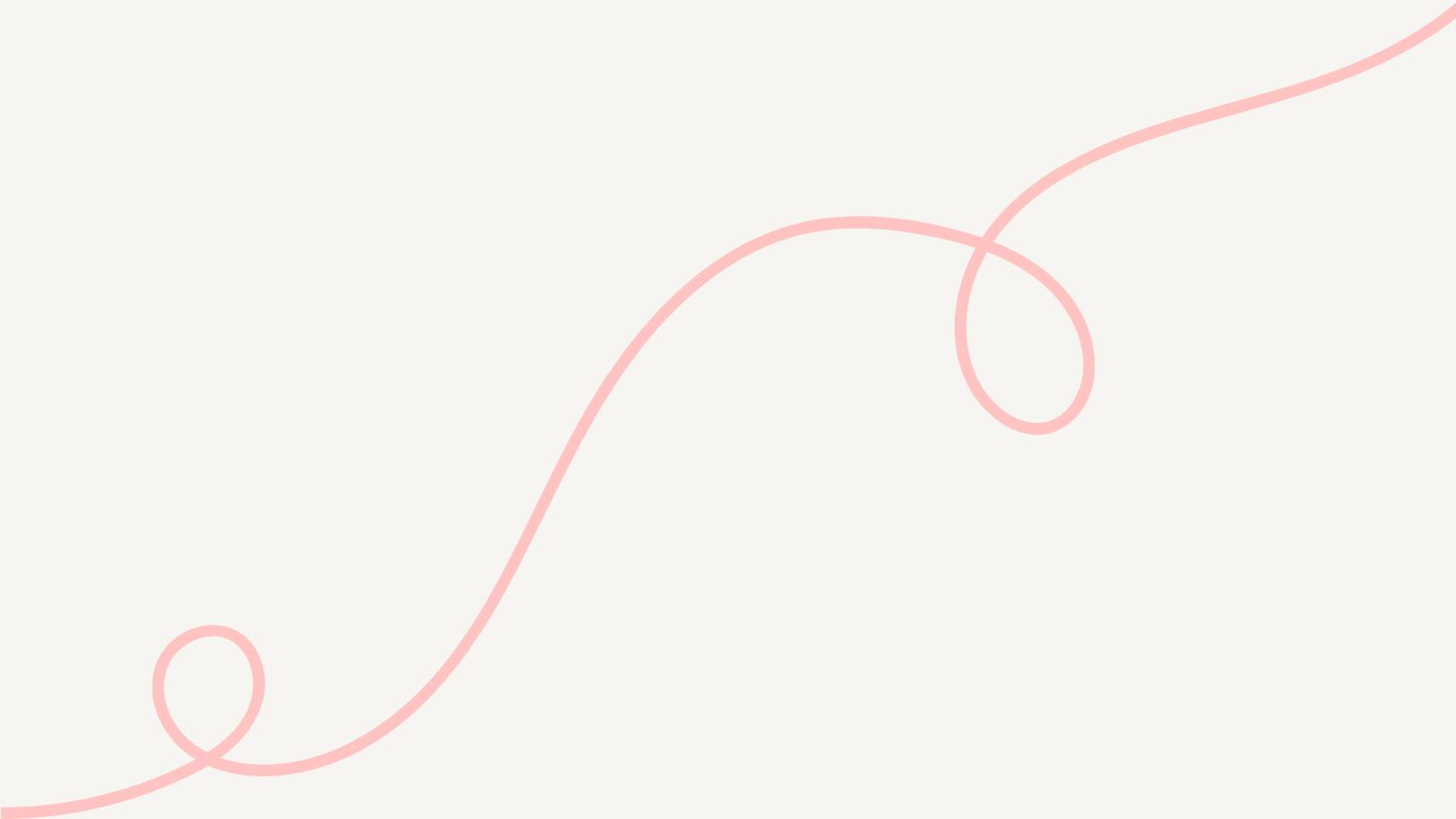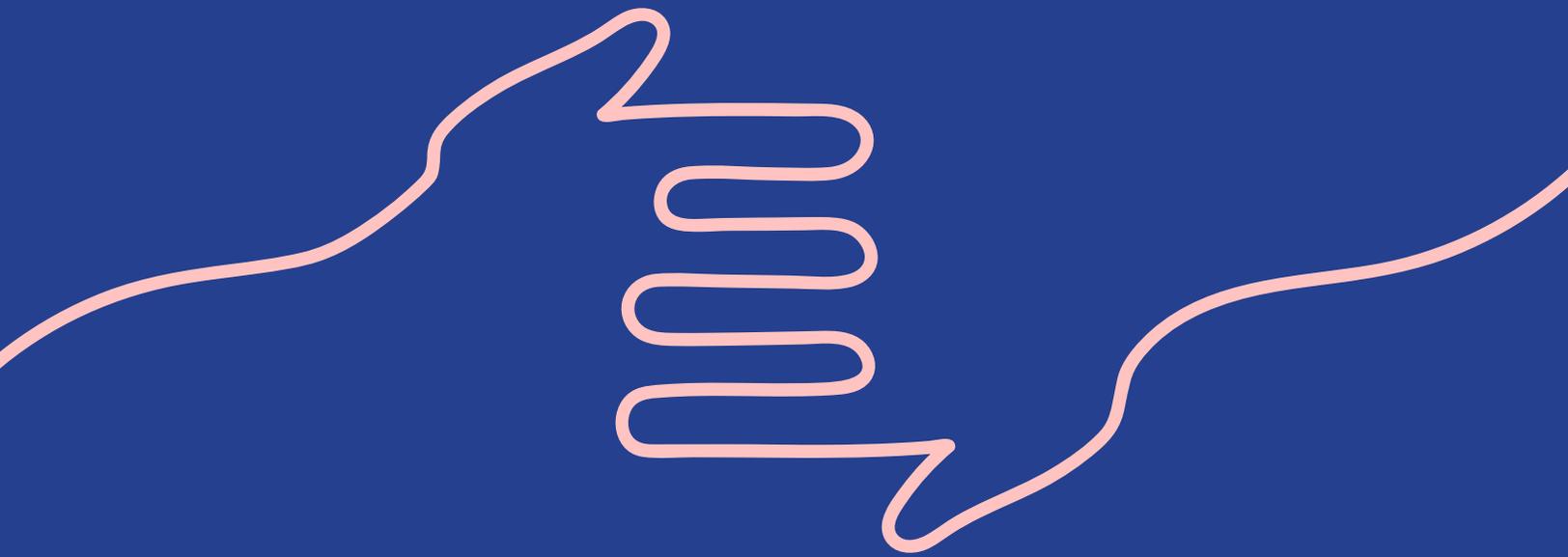
APPENDIX 6: AVAILABILITY TABLES

No Fiber | Highest Need Suburban Municipalities

MUNICIPALITY	SELECTED CENSUS TRACTS	PERCENT OF LOCATIONS WITHOUT FIBER SERVICE
Bridgeview	820502 and nearby	100%
Palatine	803604 and nearby	100%
Melrose Park	816402 and nearby	100%
Evanston	808900 and nearby	100%
Cicero	813400 and nearby	100%
Hinsdale	820101 and nearby	100%
Burbank	820901 and nearby	100%
Des Plaines	770500 and nearby	100%
Franklin Park	811302 and nearby	100%
Glenwood	828702 and nearby	100%

Availability Index | Highest Need Suburban Municipalities

MUNICIPALITY	SELECTED CENSUS TRACT	AVAILABILITY INDEX SCORE
Palatine	803612 and nearby	0.247
Northlake	811800 and nearby	0.245
Arlington Heights	803008 and nearby	0.244
Wheeling	802504 and nearby	0.243
Elk Grove Village	770202 and nearby	0.243
Glenwood	828802 and nearby	0.242
Buffalo Grove	803013 and nearby	0.241
Alsip	823303 and nearby	0.241
Schiller Park	811600 and nearby	0.240
Cicero	813702 and nearby	0.240

Toni Preckwinkle
Cook County Board President