



Installing Infrastructure is Not Enough: Forest County's Digital Navigation Journey

Situation

Forest County was in the middle of its broadband infrastructure deployment and realized that many residents, particularly the senior population and those in rural areas, needed support to connect and use the internet effectively. The county's diverse governance, including two tribal governments, added complexity to the initiative.

The University of Wisconsin Extension Community Development Educator for Forest County was familiar with the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) whose mission to address the digital adoption challenges mirrored those facing Forest County. The Extension Educator introduced government officials from Forest County, Mole Lake, and Forest County Potawatomi Tribes to NDIA's Digital Navigator model as a potential solution to increasing broadband adoption. With assistance from Extension, Forest County applied for and received a NDIA grant to develop a Digital Navigator Program.

Response

The county recognized the need to create digital opportunities, focusing on internet access, device assistance, and digital skills education. With funding, training and support from NDIA, the Forest County Digital Navigation Program was established.

- **Digital Navigator:** A Digital Navigator was hired to lead these efforts. The program provides technical assistance in three areas:
 - **Internet Access:** Helping residents find internet service providers and programs to make internet access more affordable. This includes identifying available ISPs and assisting with enrollment in affordability programs.
 - **Device Assistance:** Providing troubleshooting support, setting up new devices, and distributing refurbished devices to those in need. Partnerships with local libraries and organizations assist in sourcing and distributing these devices.
 - **Digital Skills Education:** Teaching a range of digital skills, from basic tasks like opening a Word document to more advanced skills like coding and typing. Steve partnered with local libraries and community centers to offer regular training sessions.
- **Community Partnerships:** Forming partnerships with community organizations, libraries, the Department of Aging, and tribes was critical to advancing the program. These partners shared existing resources, recruited participants, hosted sessions, and accessed added resources.
- **Community Outreach:** Attending community events e.g.; fairs, National Night Out, Health & Wellness Clinics helped to build awareness and establish the program's presence in the community.

Outcomes

The program led to several positive outcomes:

- **Client Engagement:** Over 150 clients were served, with more than 250 one-on-one sessions conducted. Personalized assistance helps participants overcome digital barriers.
- **Community Outreach:** Over 800 people engaged with the digital navigator at local events and over 50 devices were distributed. Participation in events like National Night Out and safety fairs helped raise awareness.
- **Impact Stories:** Clients experienced significant anxiety relief and improved digital skills, with many expressing gratitude for the assistance provided. Success stories included helping elderly residents navigate their devices and teaching accessibility features.
- **Increased Awareness:** Word of mouth and participation in community events helped build awareness of the program. Social media and local newspaper articles also contributed to spreading the word.

Lessons Learned

Several key lessons emerged from this initiative:

- **Partnerships Matter:** Forming partnerships with local organizations is crucial for reaching targeted populations and building a referral network. Collaborations with libraries and the Department of Aging are particularly effective.
- **Mobile Program:** Making the program mobile and meeting clients where they are, including home visits, ensures broader reach and accessibility.
- **Persistence is Key:** Initial startups can be slow, with minimal client engagement. Persistence and consistent presence at libraries and events help to build momentum. Establishing a regular schedule and participating in community events are key to success.
- **Effective Outreach:** Utilizing social media, local newspapers, and word of mouth are effective strategies for raising awareness in rural areas. The lack of a consistent media outlet in rural areas can make outreach challenging, but creative solutions like social media campaigns and community event participation proved successful.
- **Building Trust:** Establishing trust within the community is essential. Early challenges included skepticism and low initial engagement. As relationships are built, value and trust grow leading to increased participation.

This case study highlights the importance of partnerships, mobility, persistence, effective outreach, and building trust in rural communities. The Digital Navigator was pivotal in driving these efforts forward, ensuring residents could fully benefit from the broadband infrastructure being developed.

Learn More

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