Society and Philanthropy in Action: Creating New Realities in Digital Access

Fostering a sector that moves from working in silos to working in systems. This work is about building lasting relationships that collectively generate positive impact and change through philanthropy.
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The Patterson Foundation (TPF) fulfills its mission to strengthen people, organizations, and communities by connecting, learning, and sharing with others. Fostering a sector that moves from working in silos to working in systems is at the center of TPF’s mission. Organizations are more strategic and effective when they communicate, share knowledge, and collaborate. This work is about building connective tissue to create lasting relationships that collectively generate positive impact and change through philanthropy.

Michael Zimmerman’s passion for philanthropy is rooted in professional and academic experiences. Shaped by nine years of work in fundraising, development, and nonprofit management, an M.A. in Philanthropic Studies, and a post-graduate fellowship with TPF, he is driven by an increasingly nuanced understanding of the ever-evolving challenges of the 21st century.

“Recognizing the world’s deep divisions and great challenges, there are immense opportunities for philanthropic innovation and Digital Access, Equity, and Inclusion are at the core. In this work, we are continually asked to step forward with questions, listen to people’s aspirations and identify what’s shared to strive for a world where we can feel safe, connected, informed, and included. Unleashing the power of people and organizations to evolve systems that advance communities’ ideas into actions—in pursuit of change and excellence—is where our work lives and breathes.”
In 2020, TPF embarked on its Digital Access for All initiative with many questions. TPF was new to the space and had much to learn. Determined to discover what other funders were doing in the Digital Access space, TPF launched a National Philanthropy Scan on Digital Access to unearth the strategies, approaches, successes, challenges, and most importantly, who else cares.

Since 2020, TPF has connected with and learned from national thought-leaders across the digital space, including businesses, government, and nonprofits. An immense amount of insight was gathered from what funders shared about their endeavors locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally.

While the knowledge gleaned has helped shape and evolve TPF’s strategies and approaches, the Foundation recognizes the enormous value in sharing these findings widely.

Thus, the National Philanthropy Scan Report on Digital Access was produced.

This report will speak to people in different ways. Some reading this may come from backgrounds well-immersed in Digital Access. Others may be exploring whether to consider investing in the Digital Access space. For all who have decided to join this exploration, it is TPF’s hope that this report inspires a deeper engagement with the diverse strategies and approaches to advancing Digital Access.

TPF is but one player in how philanthropy and Digital Access intersect – its focus remains on the Suncoast region in Florida. However, TPF intends to share its learnings widely to help funders wherever they may be in their process of exploring or investing in Digital Access. TPF’s purpose is to share knowledge that benefits anyone interested in learning more about the Digital Access ecosystem.

You are invited to sign up for the DA4A Newsletter to stay connected. Feel free to share this report widely.

Enjoy!
While our digital evolution holds boundless possibilities for the future, access to technology is a prerequisite each one of us must have to unlock them. Strengthening Digital Access among people of all ages and backgrounds — especially those from asset-limited families — helps ensure that everyone is included in our journey toward these new realities and benefiting from the many advancements.

By 2030, half of the workforce in the U.S. will be working remotely, according to futurist and author of The Shift Age, David Houle. The nation’s labor ecosystem is moving and expanding, and there is no stopping it. With the evolving nature of how the labor market is transforming as a result of technology, we can no longer turn a blind eye to the inherent digital needs of our population. Funders play a critical role in closing these gaps.

Many are under the misconception that there is a plethora of government programs and funding in Digital Access, and therefore, philanthropic dollars are not a worthwhile investment in this space. The truth reveals a gap, and government dollars have great limitations that cannot fulfill all Digital Access needs.

While we are about to see the federal government make one of the largest investments in nationwide broadband, the investment will not fully fund new, innovative, experimental, and sustainable connectivity needs. That’s where philanthropic dollars can play a pivotal role. But until 2020, .04% of overall philanthropic dollars in the U.S. were invested in Digital Access. That trend changed over the course of the pandemic, inspiring catalytic philanthropic investment in new technologies, paving the way for government funding to build upon existing programs while embarking upon new endeavors. Yet, there is still a false perception that once government funding is established, all needs are met. And we know that won’t be the case.

In Chattanooga, Tennessee, the city-owned EPB electric power pioneered the first citywide gigabyte-per-second broadband service over a decade ago, which has promoted widespread Digital Access. This public broadband service’s success is the result of governmental funding, business support, guidance from Tech Goes Home – a nonprofit that works with schools, churches, and other organizations to help residents learn digital literacy skills and get a subsidized computer – and the Enterprise Center, a city-backed agency that works to promote the Innovation District and other technology initiatives.

Why Are Funders Called to Action to Close This Gap?

Digital technology affords people an evolving assortment of avenues to connect with one another and the world around us, creating pathways to the resources and relationships we depend on to maintain our well-being — laying the bedrock for a more inclusive society.
A Need that Encompasses All Missions

Regardless of a foundation’s mission, addressing the pressing concerns of Digital Access and inclusion will touch everything we do as a society. Funders with missions in education, theater, arts, culture, civic engagement, democracy, advocacy, climate, health & wellness, workforce, vital services, government services, financial services, economic competitiveness, supporting underserved and underrepresented populations, diversity, equity, inclusion and more all have expanding Digital Access needs. There is a need to close the gap between those with sufficient knowledge and access to technology and those without.

Here is a breakdown of each mission area and the unmet Digital Access needs:

Education
Children, teens, and adults need Digital Access to learn, acquire resources, and thrive in society. While the need in the education space before the pandemic was ever-present, it became far more apparent and needed after the pandemic. Spanning all generations pursuing their education, Digital Access is vital to ensuring all can achieve success and grow in society.

Civic Engagement, Democracy, and Advocacy
Engaging civically in our communities has moved online and will continue to shift in this direction--from how we practice our first amendment to how we find where to register to vote or when an election will occur. Digital Access is essential to participate in our democracy. And it’s important to note that everyone’s digital skills, regardless of age, are fragmented, affecting how community members engage civically. Since computer skill sets are largely contextual, it’s vital for funders to keep that in mind when thinking through how to invest strategically in Digital Access within their communities.

Theater, Arts, and Culture
Connecting with theater, art, and culture at the beginning of the pandemic became crucial to the continuity and sustainability of organizations in these spaces and their beneficiaries. Digital Access has created unique opportunities for institutions and organizations in this area to engage people and communities in geographies beyond their pre-pandemic reach.

Climate
From disasters to police activity to community recycling and composting, information is most effectively shared with the masses online. Ensuring an entire community receives notice on time relies heavily on Digital Access.

Health & Wellness
Patient portals, digital health records, and telehealth reflect our society’s shift to practicing healthcare in the digital world. Our society will need Digital Access to acquire healthcare surpassing the pre-digital era.
A Need that Encompasses All Missions

**Workforce and Government Services**
In the new digital age, the employer-employee relationship is primarily online and requires Digital Access. Employment/unemployment services, motor vehicle services, and government resources are available online, and society must have Digital Access to compete for equal opportunity.

**Vital Services**
Financial, accounting, tax, legal, governmental, and community health services are available online. Digital Access is pivotal to ensuring all can obtain resources.

**Economic Competitiveness**
Ensuring a community is equipped with digital literacy skills can position it to be more economically competitive, creating more jobs and multi-sector investment in the region.

**Locational Flexibility**
People want the flexibility to work remotely, making choices based on how they feel, what the climate is, having proximity to family, friends, and the places they enjoy, as well as when, where, and with whom they work. Digital Access is paramount to balancing these factors for quality of life.

**Supporting Underserved and Underrepresented Populations**
A disproportionate number of community members from underserved and underrepresented populations lack or have sub-par Digital Access. These populations need Digital Access to obtain essential services that others access without significant challenges.

**Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**
Giving diverse populations equal opportunity is critical to making society more equitable and inclusive.

Plenty more missions not included in this report call on funders to close the Digital Divide and address gaps in access. Some are heavily invested in Digital Access as they recognize how their mission aligns; others are somewhat invested in the space. Some funders are still figuring out where to invest, and some have not yet realized the breadth and scope of our society’s Digital Access needs and how their missions are intertwined.

Digital access and inclusion create a unique opportunity for funders to put people, businesses, nonprofits, government, education, and media on an equal playing field, but only if there’s equal, affordable access to the three essential elements: connectivity, devices, and skills training.
WHAT IS THE OPPORTUNITY?

People ages 25 and under have grown up in a world where the internet is an everyday resource and necessity. Understanding ecosystem-level change catalyzed by the pandemic aiming to reach everyone is important. Thus, technology surveys and assessments are paramount to bridging the digital divide and connecting humanity.

Digital technology affords people an evolving assortment of avenues to connect with the world around us, creating pathways to the resources and relationships we all depend on to maintain our well-being, laying the bedrock for a more inclusive society. While our digital evolution holds boundless possibilities for the future, access to affordable broadband, large screen computing devices, and appropriate digital skills training is a prerequisite each one of us must have to unlock them.

Strengthening Digital Access among people of all ages and backgrounds, especially those from asset-limited income-constrained-employed (ALICE) families, helps ensure that everyone is included and benefits from the many advancements despite their geography or socioeconomics. Given the unprecedented extent to which our world relies on digital tools to live, work, learn, play, be well, engage civically, and prosper, only a shared vision for a safe, equitable digital world can unlock the full potential of technology and address concerns over digital trust and security.

Successfully navigating the digital world will rely on everyone being all in.
WHAT ROLES CAN FUNDERS PLAY IN DIGITAL ACCESS?

Funders have the power to make a significant impact on our society to foster a more inclusive and connected world. Exploring how funders immerse in this space can help inform where to begin work in Digital Access. We are pleased to share this synopsis of our findings gathered from more than 30 funders and organizations:

Convening

Foundations play a critical role in convening resources to connect people, organizations, and communities in new ways through digital technology and creating greater access to that technology. These aspirations have broad potential for impact through philanthropy. Fostering conversations between community-based organizations (CBOs), private sector entities, government, and other funders is integral to exploring partnerships that elevate the voices of community members to move entities to collaborate on addressing needs.

Philanthropic support is also available in many communities creating unique opportunities for funders to leverage support and strengthen the impact through strategic collaborations with other funders.

It’s important that CBOs understand what resources are available and funders can play an integral role in informing their CBOs through convening. Via virtual platforms, CBOs can discover where to apply and when, ensuring optimal opportunities to address community needs in Digital Access.

Building Coalitions:

Entities spanning sectors have built coalitions around Digital Access, collaborating on various projects that advance work in the space. Partners include government, education, media, business, people, nonprofits, healthcare, and other entities.

In measuring CBO capacity, funders may seek to evaluate if organizations in their network have enough human capital to designate time and effort to complete grant applications and apply for funding. Many CBOs are managing heavy mission-centric workloads, which they must prioritize. Sometimes organizational leadership fails to see the critical relationship between their mission and how Digital Access is interconnected. It’s important to unearth these areas of misalignment.

Building Capacity

Commonly, people, organizations, and communities do not know what resources are available to them to address Digital Access needs. Funders can play a critical role in keeping their communities informed. Depending on geography, local, county, and state governments can secure funding and resources. In 2023, increased federal funding will arrive to communities countrywide to address Digital Access needs.
Building Capacity -- continued

before funding any CBO. When CBOs receive support, it’s essential these organizations have a plan for Digital Access to connect their beneficiaries effectively. In moving CBOs from silos to systems, it’s helpful to map out where capacity exists to encourage exploration around strategic partnerships with other organizations.

Devices
The gate of entry to Digital Access is through a device. If members of society lack large screen computing devices, the digital divide will perpetuate. Funders can invest in organizations that give away free or refurbished machines or sell devices at a low cost to those in need. Certified device refurbishers and recyclers provide these services to communities globally.

Funders can also lead by example and encourage, through grantmaking contingencies, that organizations receiving the funds for devices submit a plan for e-waste recycling (the recycling of devices internally and externally). Support can also be provided to companies just starting crafting e-waste plans, which is usually the biggest hurdle to getting used machines back out for a second or third life. An excellent way to build organizational capacity is by encouraging these sustainable practices.

Digital Navigation
Digital literacy skills are essential to ensuring community members can operate technology and use it optimally. Digital Navigators, typically programmatic staff at CBOs, are trained to teach digital literacy to educate the community at large. The training of Digital Navigators for basic digital skills (how to connect to Wi-Fi, router, modem, etc.) and digital literacy skills (most other matters) can be made possible by funders. It’s important that funders ensure organizations can provide ongoing support so that the training has sustained impact and longevity in the community. Funding endeavors that strategically place Digital Navigators in the community where it makes sense (i.e., hospitals, libraries, schools, and CBOs) can position a community for success in Digital Access. Funding outreach, awareness, and engagement through strategic partnerships can create systems that foster a more connected community.

Advocacy / Policy
Funding advocacy efforts locally, statewide, and nationally can ensure government funding continues to flow to Digital Access needs. Funders can also help ensure that local, state, and federal elected officials have more information on the needs and how government funding and resources can optimize Digital Access. *Funders can write policy and share it with policymakers without lobbying.

Innovation and Technology
Funders can invest in research and innovation to develop current and future technologies, including funding broadband adoption projects and public computer centers.
Connectivity

Funders can help communities understand options available for building infrastructure that connects communities. Infrastructure options include (but are not limited to):

- Municipal Broadband – municipalities can build their own infrastructure in partnership with philanthropy (restricted in 18 states as of December 2021)
- Nonprofit Mesh Networks
- Small and Large ISPs
- Fixed and Wireless

Strategic Partnerships and Multi-Sector Collaborations

Funders are catalysts of strategic partnerships and collaborations in Digital Access among public, private, and nonprofit sectors. Examples include capital-intensive broadband infrastructure endeavors. Some projects focus on construction, capacity, service, and operations, including selling or leasing excess fiber or cable strands, adding additional fiber, and easing permitting and rights-of-way. Assessments for local and regional needs encourage data-driven innovation of current technology and infrastructure.

Foundation example:
Digital Excellence Initiative | Cleveland Foundation – Creating a Connected Community. The Foundation launched its Digital Excellence Initiative in 2017 to ensure all residents could successfully participate in the digital world and economy and to elevate Greater Cleveland’s infrastructure, talent, and research prominence in digital technology and innovation. They worked with community and corporate partners to ensure that every household in Greater Cleveland has affordable internet access. Efforts included establishing the Greater Cleveland Digital Equity Fund in partnership with Cuyahoga County and T-Mobile. They are working to poise Greater Cleveland as a digital leader. Efforts included working with local governmental organizations to implement digital and human-centered smart city strategies. Learn more here.

Sustainability

Foundations are passionate about implementing sustainable practices in Digital Access and investing in resources that effectively address communities’ ever-evolving needs. From funding devices to building infrastructure, investing in Digital Access merits careful thought around each endeavor. There is no question that funders have a place in Digital Access, but the hard work is in defining the value of what Digital Access accomplishes and how to do it sustainably.

Sustainability also emerges in the form of partnerships and collaborations. For instance, sustaining a P4 (Public-Private-Philanthropic Partnership) ecosystem model to get people to come together for the greater good and find a space in Digital Access is challenging but not impossible. Funders are strategizing how to create long-term partnerships while giving the community ownership over the model. For instance, while for-profit corporations are comprised of people with incredible expertise to deliver a self-sustaining model, funders are thinking about how to leverage their dollars to encourage corporations to leverage their human capital and knowledge for the betterment of
Because Digital Access is embedded in almost every aspect of life today, measuring ecosystem-level change will involve collecting data from diverse sources. Some of these sources include economic data from chambers of commerce, truancy, grades and grade-level reading data from education systems, employment data from the department of labor, usage data from social service organizations and agencies, health data from healthcare systems, and other data affected by Digital Access. Based on the data, funders can infer whether or not their efforts are working. Be aware that varying factors will play diverse roles in influencing the data for each geographic area.

How do you measure systems change and ecosystem-level change in communities?

Because Digital Access is embedded in almost every aspect of life today, measuring ecosystem-level change will involve collecting data from diverse sources. Some of these sources include economic data from chambers of commerce, truancy, grades and grade-level reading data from education systems, employment data from the department of labor, usage data from social service organizations and agencies, health data from healthcare systems, and other data affected by Digital Access. Based on the data, funders can infer whether or not their efforts are working. Be aware that varying factors will play diverse roles in influencing the data for each geographic area.

Why are funders hesitant?

Fully sustainable digital technology starts with infrastructure buildout. Capital investment in Digital Access is a new space for many funders. Since measuring success in Digital Access is a challenge, there is a hesitancy to fund programs and services until they have already been established and proven effective. The level of investment from funders should ideally reflect a multi-year commitment. Despite the uncertainty of today’s world, more funders are beginning to explore where and how they can be invested in Digital Access as the need to be in this space has become abundantly clear.

Does money drive the thought process?

Yes. Funders can help democratize the thought process. When government funding, through appropriations, enters the landscape at the volume it has with Digital Equity, it can deter the impact of philanthropic efforts.
Why is it important for corporate philanthropy to co-invest and provide resources?

Corporations have the human capital, knowledge, and expertise that can greatly impact Digital Access. Through co-investment in funding and CSR efforts, new realities can be created for communities worldwide.

How can funders unearth the data around Digital Access needs?

Funders have commissioned academic institutions and other experts from organizations pursuing digital inclusion efforts to survey, study, and research communities, demographics, and overall Digital Access to guide their work.

We’re new to the Digital Access space. Where do we begin?

It’s best to begin with community conversations and data to unearth the community’s greatest needs around Digital Access and potential paths forward to addressing those needs. Some funders have looked at Digital Access heat maps to analyze where needs exist. Funders play an important role in bringing nonprofit, for-profit, and governmental entities to the table to facilitate conversations to forge strategic partnerships and address needs through multisector collaborations. Some funders prefer to have many stakeholders at the table to encourage community-wide participation and buy-in. Others prefer to pursue the work from their silo for more control over the timeline and management. Some see internet service providers taking the lead to drive the next steps with the community.

Why invest in devices if technology constantly changes?

Many funders feel paralyzed because technology is ever-evolving, and where there is opportunity to invest today can become outdated tomorrow. Foundation boards of trustees are reluctant to invest capital in devices that will be obsolete in a couple of years. It can feel like a poor philanthropic investment, as the long-term ROI is hard to see.

Conversely, it is worse to remain inactive and uninvested, letting the digital divide grow deeper. Devices are the gateway to connectivity. Funders have unique opportunities to play critical roles in getting devices to people through a cost-effective method with substantial ROI and sustainability. Local and regional refurbishers can provide ready-to-use recycled devices donated by corporations, governments, nonprofits, and other sources to benefit community members in need. Here are some examples of how funders have convened resources or made direct investments in devices:

- Investing in devices increases community participation and reaches target populations needing specific (mission-centered) programming.
- Providing connectivity reimbursement or vouchers for ALICE individuals and families.
What is the role of philanthropy regarding infrastructure in the Digital Access space?

Philanthropy can play many roles in Digital Access:

- Hosting community conversations and researching infrastructure to understand the community's needs.
- Convening funders and potential partners to discuss the needs of the community to map out a plan of action.
- Leveraging funding to encourage public-private-philanthropic partnerships.
- Advocating for policy change that elevates Digital Access as a community priority to close the digital divide.

What does Digital Equity mean?

Not all individuals have Digital Access for various reasons, including race, age, gender, socioeconomics, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender expression, religion, underrepresentation, and more. Equity and Inclusion in Digital Access uphold democracy through increased civic participation of all community members, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services.

What role can funders play in advocacy in Digital Access?

It's important that those making the decisions in your community understand that digital equity needs sustainable, long-term investment and a clear mission to support societies' economic and social advancement. Funders can advocate to reverse regulations where ISPs have taken control of the access to build out solely on potential income and not where the underserved live without access.

How are funders investing internationally?

Each country presents different challenges and needs in Digital Access. There are various factors to consider when pursuing Digital Access work internationally.

How do I ensure my community is well-positioned to receive funding and resources?

Studying the landscape of your community early through the presence of Digital Access can provide the knowledge needed of where underserved areas lie. Building good working relationships with entities across the sectors immersed in Digital Access is crucial to ensuring communities are at the front of the line. By doing so, funders can stay informed of funding opportunities and other resources that advance Digital Access in communities. In ensuring community readiness, funders can play a unique role as a convener of resources and information to help the community stay informed on all funding and resources available.
How do we know when we’re done? What does success look like?

Since digital technology transformation is ever-evolving, our work never ends. Trends that continue to drive digital acceleration, such as the pandemic, prompted a quantum leap into online services and the use of digital technology. New needs will continue to emerge, and Digital Access will become even more essential to our everyday lives. However, we can measure success depending on the area of investment a funder prioritizes. Referencing page 10, which elaborates on how to measure systems and ecosystems change, can help in deciding how to measure success.

I know I can work with Internet Service Providers (ISPs), but what other options might I want to consider when exploring ways to bridge communities in need of connectivity?

There are many options to consider when exploring ways to connect local communities:

- Municipal Broadband - municipalities can build their own infrastructure and have done so in partnership with philanthropy (restricted in 18 states as of December 2021)
- Nonprofit Mesh Networks
- Small and Large ISPs
- Fixed and Wireless

It’s important to explore all avenues for connectivity before committing. Many funders are challenged with pursuing the options that will be most cost-effective and have the greatest longevity and sustainability for the community. Considering government funding that can assist with internet affordability helps guide the conversations around costs.

So you’ve wired every home, do they have devices? Appropriate Content? Skills? Reliable Connectivity? Affordability?

It’s important to consider questions about “what comes next” before venturing toward Digital Access priorities. This question reaffirms the ever-evolving nature of Digital Access and how our work is never done.
Are you curious about other questions funders are wrestling with within Digital Access? Here are questions funders voiced:

- How has the Digital Access landscape changed over the last six months?
- How are funders investing in Digital Access (i.e., alone, collaborating with other funders, in multi-sector collaborations, specific partners)?
- Where and how can funders invest in connectivity (i.e., wired connections or wireless)?
- How are funders investing in Digital Access equipment (i.e., routers, modems, wifi extenders)?
- How do funders work on improving digital services in the Digital Philanthropy space?
- Where and how can healthcare funders invest with impact to harness technology to improve health systems?
- How can the internet become a utility run by municipalities?
- How can funders invest in endeavors that combat Cyber Crime?
- How is Digital Access incorporated into the work of funders focused on a primary population?
- What is the role of AI in the nonprofit/justice space?
- In the future, when we are all online, how can we grapple with how not to make AI not inherently racist?

**Join us as we continue the conversation with funders around Digital Access. Click here to learn more.**

**Glossary | Sources**


https://drive.google.com/file/d/1M1LSvbbWyPou6oxUk4YBtWoEdVI8PhL/view

https://davidhoule.com/

The Patterson Foundation thanks the following funders and organizations for their participation in the National Philanthropy Scan on Digital Access: